Planning Online Degree Programs: The Stakeholders’ Perspectives

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Abstract

This qualitative case study applied the lens of the negotiation of power and interests to the planning process for an online degree program. The major findings of the study were: 1) stakeholders bring to the planning process conflicting perspectives of what constitutes an effective planning process, and 2) the actual planning process followed is negotiated among the stakeholders negotiating the process.

Introduction

For the most part, online degree program development efforts have been approached using existing models from instructional design. Cervero and Wilson [2] provide an alternative to the classical instructional design models with their negotiation of power and interests model. According to Cervero and Wilson, "Planning programs is a social activity in which people negotiate personal and organizational interests" (p. 4). They contend that programs are not created by following a series of steps, or by making a set of best judgments, or by identifying power inequities; rather they are created through the social negotiation of the interests of the involved stakeholders. As proposed by its authors, the negotiation of power and interests model describes what happens during the planning process (descriptive component) and then provides a set of prescriptions for managing that process (prescriptive component). The descriptive component of the model characterizes the fundamentals of what planners do in all planning situations: negotiate competing stakeholder interests within existing systems of power. The prescriptive component proposes that effective planning requires program planners to act in such a way that the interests of all stakeholders are represented in the planning of an educational program.

Purpose and Research Questions

This investigation applied the lens of the negotiation of power and interests model to the planning process for an online degree program. The research questions were:

1. What technical planning process did NetEd stakeholders follow to plan and implement the online programming?

2. What interests related to the process did NetEd stakeholders bring to the process and how did the negotiation of those interests affect the resulting NetEd planning process?

Methodology

The study employed an embedded qualitative case study design [9]. The case was NetEd, a statewide, online, undergraduate degree program initiative undertaken by the university system of a large southeastern state. Semi-structured, one-on-one interviews were conducted with each of the 13 participants and follow-up e-mail interviews were conducted with six participants. Observations were conducted of seven 3 – 4 hour meetings in which NetEd stakeholders participated. In addition, over 50 NetEd planning documents were collected and analyzed together with the researcher’s journal. Data analysis for this case study had descriptive and explanatory components. Merriam’s [4] constant comparative method guided the descriptive component while Yin’s [9] explanation building guided the explanatory component.

Program Description

NetEd was a statewide, online undergraduate degree program initiative undertaken by the university system of a large southeastern state [1]. NetEd consisted of two projects: NetMan, provider of the web portal providing access to the online degrees and associated student services; and NetCore, the online core curriculum development project within NetEd. The University NOC provided high-level oversight functions for NetEd, DevelopInc did the development, and University System OAA provided the day-to-day project management.

Technical Planning Process

The findings showed three levels of planning for the NetEd project: NetMan stakeholders planning of the student services’ portal, University NOC stakeholders planning of the online core curriculum, and the NetCore development teams development of the online core curriculum. The NetCore development teams were composed of representatives from the University System OAA, DevelopInc, and Online Faculty stakeholder groups.

Cervero and Wilson [2] described three categories of models that govern traditional planning: classical,
naturalistic, and critical. In classical models, planners follow a prescribed sequence of steps beginning with objectives and ending with evaluation. In naturalistic models, planners deliberate using established values. In critical models, planners organize and disorganize attention in social and organizational systems of power. The data showed no evidence of the use of classical, naturalistic or critical models. The data suggested that NetEd stakeholders attempted to use a variation of one of the classical models, only to see their efforts thwarted by resource constraints and the preferences of other stakeholder groups.

**Process Interests**

Cervero and Wilson [2] described three types of stakeholder interests: expressed interests, which are the stated, or revealed, preferences of individuals involved in the planning process; ideal interests, which refer to “what is really in the interest or good of a person, whether she or he thinks so or not” (p. 124); and, real interests, which are the “norms, values, and purposes implicit in what planners do” (p. 125). NetEd stakeholders brought three interests related to process to the planning and implementation process: planning model selection, process control and process flexibility. This investigation showed that while negotiating interests related to the planning process, NetEd stakeholders also negotiated the planning process itself.

**Conclusions**

The major findings of this research are consistent with the descriptive component of the negotiation of power and interests model: 1) stakeholders bring to the planning process conflicting perspectives of what constitutes an effective planning process, and 2) the actual planning process followed is negotiated among the stakeholders.

In terms of practice, the concept of a negotiated planning process helps to remind instructional designers and technologists that their work is accomplished in political environments and to remind them that they must address the inherent politics of those environments if they are to accomplish their instructional design and development goals. It follows then that that application of the prescriptive component of Cervero and Wilson’s model may assist with these negotiations. Further study should be conducted in which planners/designers/technologists apply the prescriptive component of the model to their planning practice to uncover the impact of the model on the process.

The idea of negotiated process strengthens the instructional design literature that suggests the need for a negotiated instructional design process. Moallem's [5] research into teacher thinking, and the associated conceptual model of teacher thinking, led her to conclude that a cognitive approach to designing instruction should be replaced by "a socially shared approach if instructional design models are to be used in school systems" (p. 61). Reigeluth [6] contended that the instructional design process should include all stakeholder groups, so that their "interests, values and perspectives can be accounted for in the instructional design and organizational changes" (p. 18). Edmonds, Branch and Mukherjee’s [3] hard systems – intuitive systems continuum suggest that different contexts require different models that adhere more or less strictly to the strict step-by-step process of classical instructional design. Wedman and Tessmer’s [8] Layers of Necessity model of instructional design is one example of a negotiated instructional design process. Depending on the resources and time available, the Layers of Necessity model directs instructional designers to use models with more or less steps. Tripp and Bichelmeyer's [7] Rapid Prototyping model is another example of a negotiated instructional design process. Future research should seek to better understand the concept of a negotiated planning process by investigating planning situations that employ both the negotiation of power and interests model and a traditional instructional design model.

**References**