Conversations Along a Crooked Path

Our QC project began with a system-level and externally motivated attempt to redirect a process of curricular change at the University of Utah (U of U) School of Business that looked like it might interrupt smooth transition pathways for Salt Lake Community College (SLCC) students. Along the way, through an evolving understanding of our primary objectives and ongoing conversations, our project resulted in four core business courses with a set of common learning outcomes, signature assignments, and assessment metrics. Most importantly, our project resulted in eight faculty across the two institutions building trust and developing a common language about student learning. The path was anything but linear, easy, or efficient. At moments, it wasn’t even pleasant. But, because we kept meeting and talking it was ultimately highly efficacious. In the end, we developed the relationships and processes necessary for strong partnerships among faculty and a better understanding of how students navigate this pathway. This is our story and the lessons we learned.

Lesson #1: Let the Objectives of the Project Evolve

The initial objective of the project, as described in an early project report, was “for the two institutions to agree upon criteria consistent with the Degree Qualifications Profile (DQP: http://degreeprofile.org/) that represent student learning competence” in an associates level business degree. Initially, a good bit of discussion centered on using e-portfolios as part of the competency assessment element of the project. Salt Lake Community College is a national leader in the use of e-portfolios and, it was thought, this might be a good opportunity for the University to take advantage of that leadership. After much discussion this idea was abandoned, because it didn’t seem feasible to the University team members. Real or not, an early belief was that to meet the objective of the project, all faculty at both institutions who teach the four core business courses had to adopt a common curriculum, texts, pedagogy, and assessments; this belief put a dead halt to collaboration for several months.

Through conversations it emerged that a lack of understanding of the organizational and instructional differences between the two institutions was a roadblock. At SLCC, adjunct instructors are
provided course outlines, syllabi, assignments, and assessment guidelines by full-time faculty course leads. At the University, adjunct instructors may be full-time faculty from departments outside of the School of Business who have a great deal of autonomy in teaching. Once this issue was understood, the team agreed that the scope of the project would be narrowed to the four pairs of faculty on the team with no expectations that they would scale (or impose) their work to a broader audience of instructors. The pairs would focus on common learning outcomes, signature assignments, and assessment metrics in the common core business courses.

Another key step in bringing faculty back to the project was directing the focus back to students. Data were shared showing that more than half of U of U business students transfer from SLCC and that many students have enrollment patterns of swirling between SLCC and U of U. Success data also helped dispel some biases and suspicions faculty had based on anecdotal or limited evidence of student performance. The theme of “your students are our students” emerged and framed ongoing discussions.

Lesson #2: Get the Right People on the Team

Collins and Porras (2004), in their popular book about successful companies, write that getting and keeping the right people on the team is essential to success. Our experience supports their advice. While team membership (the School of Business dean, four business faculty, and the assistant provost) from SLCC didn’t shift much, the opposite was true for involvement from the University of Utah. Over the course of this three-year project we had three different associate deans of the University of Utah’s business school involved – a sabbatical and a reluctant interim appointment took their toll on the team dynamics.

Neither Barbara nor Ann was an original QC member, and they were brought onto the team at different stages to provide administrative support and assessment expertise to help the discussions progress. We became, as we write below, the fairly neutral voices that understood the language of learning outcomes but had no stake in how business was taught and learned. Additionally, during the project’s final phase the University of Utah’s School of Business hired a new associate dean who came from a private liberal arts institution and had a strong background in learning outcomes and assessment. He also had a long and successful history teaching statistics to business students. Now we had our team; a combination of content experts and learning outcomes experts with strong administrative leadership from both institutions who held overlapping content and learning process expertise.

Lesson #3: Create a Common Language
As is true for many discussions of assessment and student learning outcomes in academia, participants needed to shift the paradigm from *what I teach* to what students learn and how do I know they are learning. Our QC dyad found this shift required the development of a common language so they could talk about student learning objectively and candidly. Elements of this common language included: critical thinking, learning outcomes, signature assignments, and rubrics. SLCC faculty had years of experience in assessing student learning within their program but had not engaged in substantive discussions about expectations for student learning with colleagues from the university. U of U faculty were provided information on Bloom’s Taxonomy and how it can be used to structure learning from very basic levels of thinking like recognition and recall to advanced levels like analysis, synthesis, evaluation, and creativity.

There was one critical day toward the end of the project when the language of assessment and learning outcomes became more than talk and became a way of thinking. The faculty pairs who taught the courses of Survey of Accounting, Microeconomics, and Business Statistics with fairly concrete and demonstrable learning outcomes were making good progress with their signature assignments and plans for assessment. However, the faculty who taught Foundations of Business, a general education course focused on the development of critical thinking, were floundering. The institutions did not use the same text for the course and the sticking point was the belief that reading an anthology of articles was not the same as reading Aristotle. The aha moment occurred when the two faculty agreed that it doesn’t matter what the text is, what matters is how students think critically about business foundations, and that this can be demonstrated by students through different assignments and projects. The discussion could then evolve to what critical thinking as a learning outcome looks like and how we will assess it.

This obstacle to progress would not have been overcome without the input and guidance of folks outside of the business schools with experience and expertise in assessment. Having impartial team members to help facilitate discussions and share expertise when needed was an important factor in moving the project forward.

**Lesson #4: Most Important, Keep Talking**

Given unclear objectives, a lack of mutual understanding of the cultures of the two institutions, and shifting team membership, it would have been very easy to give up on this project. And, we might have abandoned the project if it had not been initially driven by a system-level direction. This system-
level commitment meant that neither school was free to “throw in the towel.” Each school reports to the Utah System of Higher Education, so giving up was not an option. Additionally, to her credit, the Assistant Commissioner for Academic Affairs, Teddi Safman, kept patiently calling us to meetings several times a semester, fed us lunch, and kept us talking to one another. These conversations allowed us to find the objectives that would coalesce the project, helped us create a common language, and created a stabilizing experience despite the changing faces of the team’s membership.

Our regular meetings combined with attending the periodic AAC&U QC meetings did more than help us complete our project. Through these regular and ongoing experiences, we learned about each other’s families and favorite pastimes. Over meals and an occasional adult beverage we learned to laugh at each other’s jokes and empathize with difficult situations at work. We moved beyond our institutional identities and became professionals who share a commitment to student learning and success in our programs. This shift was perhaps most tangible during one of the last meetings when we, Barbara and Ann, walked into a meeting and each faculty team was already hard at work on their projects; our presence was unnoticed and totally unnecessary.

References