

Introducing Instructional Technology to a Rural College Campus

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Introduction

In the face of increasing competition from online colleges and universities, as well as increased interest among some faculty to incorporate newer technologies into their teaching, our campus hired an Instructional Technologist to help with faculty needs. However, this does not mean the general campus population has been ready to accept the help or any subsequently recommended changes to the campus technology infrastructure. The areas that need to work together and that come to odds frequently are the people, the technology and the financial needs.

These three areas often overlap or have constraints placed within them that are beyond anyone's control. These constraints could be hardware upgrades required for mandated software upgrades, accreditation changes in an academic program, or budget cuts from the state. These constraints should not keep campuses from moving toward a better use of technology. The Salem Campus of KSU has experience working with people, and technology within financial constraints to improve technology use.

People

A general understanding of behavior and how people adjust to change is important to introducing anything new. In general, people resist change. In order to help with this we have implemented changes gradually. This has allowed the opportunity to announce the change early then let them get use to the idea of the change that is coming. Then a training session is offered for the user that is anxious about the change. Knowledge about the change and how it impacts them reduces questions and offers a feeling of empowerment. Next we implement the change to the users or departments that are interested or excited about the change. The positive discussions and attitudes are passed to the less interested and help with acceptance. These trendsetters also help us work out any unforeseen bugs or problems that may creep up with other user styles. Having a small group of people to work with also helps us with support issues as they arise. After things settle down, we finish the rollout to the masses. We now have a larger base of users on campus who can answer small questions and a smaller group of users that will call for help. The small groups will allow for quicker response times. Quicker response times are very important to keep anxiety down and user satisfaction up.

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The idea of quick response time is in line with customer service. Customer service is a people issue from the user side and the technician side. There are many different ideas on campus about what the level of customer service should be and who should be receiving that level of service. Interestingly, there are also many different opinions of the level of customer service received by the faculty here. The campus needs to balance that service level to a manageable level. To begin building trust we started talking to people, asking what they wanted, offering help, and just smiling in the hallway. Small things seemed to help build their trust in the new department and when they ask for something it was important to respond to it quicker than they expected. Following up a little while later also helped earn trust. Now the reputation for customer service appears to be moving up and more people are bringing ideas to us. This also means that when a change is introduced there is more trust that the department won't leave them without support and in return reduces resistances to change.

There is often a small turnout at training sessions and this is often very frustrating when education is key to getting a new concept into employees hands. The university implemented a new software package for travel reimbursement shortly before the department was established. Training was offered before it was mandatory to use the new software and turnout was low. Usage of this new software was low and individuals' money wasn't arriving when expected because items were done wrong. In order to get the training to the people the business office and the trainers worked together. When a reimbursement came in that was wrong the business office alerted the traveler they needed to make an appointment with the trainer to solve the problem. We as trainers took the opportunity to train on the entire product as well as solve the problem. The word got out to friends that if you were unsure how to fill out the travel form, contact the trainer first and you'll get your money faster. Training became important when there was an immediate need. This has happened in other software areas as well. It's important to offer training when the need is there. Unfortunately, that "need" will not always be the same for everyone or be realized at the same time and one-on-one training may be required.

Policy and procedural issues will often be cause for conflict. When working with faculty members about the pros and cons of using the online testing feature within a course management package always include in this process an explanation that they or a designated person should type in the questions. This is a departmental policy on this campus because the error rate of typing a test for an unfamiliar subject is too high. A formal grievance could be filed against a faculty member for a mistake that our department made. Recently a refusal to type a test for a faculty member ended in a person refusing to use the product. As the trainers we had to review the policy and decide which was worse – breaking the policy or discouraging a faculty member from moving into the technology age. After reviewing some history of the faculty member it was decided to protect the department and faculty member. In a previous location of employment laptops were offered to faculty instead of desktop computers. A policy for support and a clear definition of what could be saved on the laptop was established. However, the policy failed to address how often the university should inventory the device and be permitted to verify that proper software patches are being applied. Some of the faculty were leaving their laptop elsewhere and monopolizing a very small faculty computer lab.

Issues are now arising that faculty members are trying to use technology for instruction and the students are not prepared. Some complaints have been that students don't know their password; they are unfamiliar with the course management system, and they don't understand how to send attachments with e-mail. There is a limited amount of contact hours an instructor has with the

student to teach content and now they have to teach the technology. The subject area suffers and many faculty drop the technology to preserve the content. As trainers it's important to understand this weakness and work to correct it. The first thing we implemented was the availability of tutoring in our Academic Tutoring Center. By generating a handbook with handouts and quick guides that the tutor could use or copy for the student the anxiety was kept low and willingness to try was high. Another location successfully changed the way the curriculum of university orientation was taught. The change forces the new students to use the course management system and e-mail regularly so they remember their password and how to use the technologies. Hopefully this change can be made at this location as well. There are also plans to offer workshops that the faculty can require students to attend if they plan to utilize certain technologies in their classrooms. This takes the teaching of the technology out the classroom and makes it the responsibility of the student.

Sometimes the idea of change takes much longer to be accepted than we are comfortable with. We just need to stop and look back at the changes that have already occurred and learn to be patient. When the instructional technology department was established at this campus, technology requests were still being handled by paper and pencil and they still are. The instructor has to be on campus to request most types of technology and then they need to wait for the paper to work its way through the departments to know if they can use it. There are several employees on campus that have a hard time with using such a slow process when faculty need to adjust quickly to the needs of the students. It's very important to stop and realize there isn't enough need yet for a process greater than paper and pencil and with a little patience change will happen. With enough need, others will push the implementations for us. Many of the challenges our department has faced have been with the computer department who have handled problems for many years with a hard-line security policy to prevent problems. Understanding that and trying to break down those policies gradually appears to be the best way to handle these strict policies without creating adversaries. Some of the policies have to be adjusted to allow for technology upgrades and progression, so again patience allows for change without requiring battles.

It is very important that you understand someone's job when you are advising them how they could change to do it better. We certainly don't all understand chemistry or genetics but can get training and experience in using technology to enhance education. Recently a faculty member got really irritated with the department because we didn't understand how upset her students got when things changed in her classroom. This was in response to trying to help with a problem she was having. She pointed out how long she had been teaching and how we couldn't relate to her and her students because of that fact. If you are aware of someone's biases like this instructor it is important to give them facts about how changing will benefit them. It's really hard to give real classroom examples without having an understanding of pedagogy. Begin working with faculty by asking how they currently teach a class or what is not working with their current instruction. Then offer several suggestions on how things can be improved with different types of technology using examples in their discipline. Having a general knowledge of their technology history and suaveness will dictate the types of suggestions to make. It's important to not set anyone up for failure, success breeds more success. When the novice person is excited about the change in their classroom then they will share and more novice people want to talk with you.

Technology

Our campus is running out of classroom space due to our increased enrollment and need for computer labs. Also wireless technology is becoming popular if not second nature throughout the world. Therefore, one of the first projects the department was asked to complete on campus was getting one hundred percent wireless coverage on campus. The computer department was concerned about security issues and when they were pushed to implement it, only implemented the technology in the small student lounge and library. There was little or no publicity of the added feature and faculty were upset they did not have access in the classrooms. Our department had worked with the university's various areas concerning wireless so we started all the paperwork and planning for the completion of the project. Once the plans started coming together and technicians were going to start showing up on site the computer technicians on our campus took over the project without being asked. When the wireless was available throughout the campus a wireless laptop cart with 26 laptops was purchased to help alleviate double booking of the computer labs and computer lab availability.

There are a few faculty that are interested in using some new software that is more hardware intensive than the current labs are capable of handling. The campus has a policy of upgrading all the labs every three years. After the third year the computers go to faculty offices. This has worked well for support issues and maintenance of the computers as they age. As technology increases at an exponential rate the computer processing speed and memory cannot maintain the campus computing needs for three to four years. In order to offer at least one lab every year that is top of the line, a proposal was made that every year at least one lab is updated. The only drawback to the new plan is how faculty will get the computers after the third year. There will not be enough computers every year for every faculty member to get a new computer nor is it practical. Ideally, all faculty need to get new computers not computers that are 3 years old. As we encourage them to use technology more we should be giving them the resources they need to accomplish their goals. However, financially this may not be possible.

There is currently a technology committee that advises the computer department, the business department, and the deans' office. The committee advises how to spend allocations of funds, which direction to move technology, when to upgrade, technology policy changes, etc. The committees consist of faculty from various disciplines as well as administration from the computing department, business department, and dean's office. The committee can be very large with many different agenda's on the table. This creates restraints on how fast we progress and on the items we can all agree on. There are concerns about the validity this committee holds among all parties. There have been recommendations stalled by administration because they didn't approve of them and only certain items sent to them for review before completing an item. It appears the committee has been used as an escape goat when needed and bypassed when it's better. Possibly a different format for this committee would keep this type of decision making from happening. A format where campus needs are reviewed and ranked without concern to funding availability would be preferred. Then when funding is available the needs would be addressed in the order of rank.

There are several pieces of technology on campus that were bought with grant money or out of departmental budgets that are sitting unused and affecting peoples reputations. One such item is a set of personal response systems. Training for these items wasn't enough for faculty to want to jump into a classroom with them. A plan to offer a student activity with the response systems

including the faculty in a “get to know your faculty” or a student competition setting where faculty create the questions hopefully will help with those feelings. This format creates a fun way to use the “clickers” and generates an interest in the technology from both the students and the faculty.

Technology can also be driven by an individual faculty’s interest in an area. One faculty member found he liked to download and listen to podcasts as entertainment and wanted to try something new in one of his courses. Investigation then began into podcasting and discussing how to incorporate this interest into his discipline. The ideas and enthusiasm turned into an office full of production equipment, a designated course with podcasting as its focus, and a classroom full of students. The output from the course is going to be used to educate community members on various child care issues on a local public access channel and on topic appropriate web page. This new teaching opportunity that now has the needed technology will hopefully generate excitement about trying this new form of technology.

Financial

The Technology department that is currently on campus has expertise in hardware and networking experience. Their work boundaries have been limited to those areas. Therefore areas such as phones that are plugged into the data rack were assigned to the business assistant that had no idea how the technology worked. Some in house work could be done with some basic knowledge of the data closet and the phone system. Communicating with telephone services and doing some onsite trouble shooting can be done without costing a fee. This savings can be used for other technology items. The knowledge of the phone system can also help when a conference call is needed in a different room or a video phone needs to be moved into a larger area. Both items are good educational opportunities.

There are departments that need to work with technology that will take financial short cuts to stay within their budget without meeting the overall goals of the original project. The maintenance department is responsible for hanging equipment and running electric to areas for technology. There have been many times when the project is complete, items need to be redone or faculty have to accept less than adequate teaching conditions because maintenance lacked the manpower hours and financial support to do the job to specifications. On this campus it has been as simple as hanging screens in an area where students cannot see them, to laying out a classroom backwards, to purchasing equipment that wasn’t not what was requested. The business office and the instructional technologist need to communicate in order to have all these needs and requirements setup ahead of time with a plan on how each item will be handled.

At the same time that the campus is supporting the use of more technology the business office is concerned that the campus has too many computer labs to maintain and approached the instructional technology department to see if all the labs were indeed needed. Data was collected back three years and then we looked at what classes were formally scheduled in labs as well as the extra functions that were planned in the same labs. Usage turned out to be low enough that with some more creative scheduling of classes and greater usage of the recently purchased wireless laptop cart at least two labs could be closed. With two less labs to support the refresh/upgrade of the computers could happen more frequently and tech support would have more time to focus on other areas. This has not occurred yet because the people component has some issues that need addressed.

It's very hard to spend money on technology items when you're really not sure if they will be used or sit in a closet somewhere. Sometimes you have a request that will take all the money that is allocated to you but will only be used by a few people. When you are making decisions on how to spend a limited amount of money, always go for the item that will affect the most users. You are basically getting the most "bang for your buck". It's hard to not endorse the cutting edge users but the more users you make happy the more difference in the overall technology lives you will make.

Conclusion

Technology is everywhere now. Our students can use it to get the news, weather, do their banking, communicate, getting their grades, file their taxes, and much much more. These items would not be continuing to be developed and introduced if people were not using them. As educators we need to understand that our students are part of this population and continue to reinvent our teaching methods.

People play the biggest role in introducing changes on rural college campuses. Even within the financial and technology component you can see the people component throughout. Without a good foundation of technical support and a personal touch introducing technology will be a struggle but not impossible. Changes can be made and excitement generated with little or no financial support.