Small Wins Approach to Changing Minds about Blended Learning

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SMALL WINS APPROACH TO CHANGING MINDS ABOUT BLENDED LEARNING

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Abstract:
Although blended learning offers many potential benefits to students and institutions, there is still some resistance from faculty. Change management is especially difficult in university settings due to issues related to faculty governance. The “small-wins” approach to change management advocates undertaking a series of limited, concrete projects that bring about moderately-important outcomes. The small wins approach maps well to a number of strategies for overcoming resistance. This paper discusses the small wins approach to overcoming resistance to blended learning in a university setting.

Keywords: distance learning, blended learning, resistance, change management

I. INTRODUCTION

Blended learning offers the potential for a number of benefits when compared to face-to-face or fully online learning modalities. Some believe that blended learning combines “the best of both worlds” by taking advantage of the socialization opportunities of the face-to-face classroom with the technology-enhanced learning potentials of online learning (Dziuban et al., 2004). In fact, studies have shown that a blended format increases student learning and enhances overall student satisfaction (Bates and Watson, 2008; Krentler and Willis-Flurry, 2005; Mosca et al., 2010). Both learners and institutions may benefit from blended learning. The asynchronous nature of the online portion of a blended class is not only convenient, but also affords the opportunity for learners to reflect prior to contributing to discussions (Van Slyke, et al., 2010). In a blended format, online discussions allow for extending conversations beyond the time constraints of an in-class meeting (Van Slyke, et al., 2002). The integration of web based instruction in the blended format also helps individuals to undertake deeper processing led by integrating new information with existing knowledge structures (Salomon, 1988; Spiro & Jehng, 1990; Sitzmann et al., 2006). These advantages can be particularly valuable for working adults who must juggle family, work and school demands. Although findings are still equivocal, there is some evidence that technology-mediated learning may lead to higher learning achievement (Jhang, Krug and Zhang, 2007).

Blended learning also offers several benefits to institutions. For example, a blended approach may make classes more attractive to working students due to the reduced necessity to travel to campus. Blended courses result in opportunities to use classroom space more efficiently (Dziuban et al., 2004). Blended courses also lead to the creation of high quality learning environments as they leverage a cluster of instructional methods such text, audio, video, and
graphics and could be customized to meet individual needs (Sitzmann, et al., 2006). Thus blended learning models helps institutions complement traditional models or even replace them with more flexible, learner centered, highly interactive and meaningful learning environments (Kirkley and Kirkley 2005; Nel and Wilkinson, 2006). While many institutions embrace distance learning as a legitimate modality, there is still resistance at some universities. Changing entrenched thinking is a challenging change management problem, especially in academic environments. The case study discussed in this abstract seeks to investigate the following research question:

Can Weick’s approach of “small wins” be employed to overcome resistance to distance learning?

We use an action research approach to investigating this question. We are involved in ongoing efforts to promote blended learning approaches in the business school of a mid-sized private university. Background information on the context in which we conduct this research is provided below.

II. BACKGROUND

The university in question is approaching its 200th anniversary; the business school is 100 years old. The institution takes great pride in being one of the first universities in the United States to offer formal business education at the university level. While this history has many positive aspects, it brings with it a certain level of inertia. One way in which this inertia presents itself is in resistance to distance learning. Prior to 2009, the business school had not offered any distance learning-based courses or blended-learning courses, although course management systems were widely adopted for face-to-face, for-credit courses. In addition to institutional inertia, a variety of issues led to a general resistance to distance learning. Some faculty were concerned about potential impacts on an upcoming AACSB re-affirmation. A history of technical problems with classroom software was also cause for concern. There is also concern among the faculty that distance learning runs counter to the university’s image as being very student centered. Due to these and other factors, some faculty are resistant to the idea of distance learning.

Despite this resistance, a confluence of events led to increased interest in distance learning. First, school administration recognized competitive pressures towards utilizing distance learning. Second, the school hired new faculty with successful experience and expertise in distance learning. Finally, there was student interest in distance learning modalities, particularly among part-time graduate students.

III. SMALL-WINS APPROACH TO CHANGE

Large-scale changes, if attempted all at once, encourage success-blocking “arousal mechanisms,” including fear of failure, feeling overwhelmed by the need to learn new systems, inability to overcome the complexity represented by the change and a general resistance to change. According to Weick (1984), breaking down large, complex challenges into much smaller, related challenges reduces stress, increases feelings of participation and potentially energizes activity toward future challenges. These small challenges may result in “small wins,” which are concrete, complete projects that bring about moderately-important outcomes. Further, small wins preserve gains; once a small win is accomplished, associated gains remain, even in the face of subsequent failures. The consequences of small wins are also easier to communicate and grasp. It is also relatively easier to bring about cooperation in small requests, which increases feelings of participation and cooperation. Small wins are also less disruptive than “big” wins. This is important as disruptions, whether real or imagined, often bring about resistance and countermeasures.

Resistance to change often results when individuals feel that they will not be able to cope with the change. A strategy of small wins addresses this in multiple ways. First, by breaking down the challenge into small parts, the cost of any single failure is reduced. In addition, the perceived level of effort is reduced, which may increase willingness to participate. Finally, the perceived skill
requirements are lowered, making individuals feel that they are more able to contribute. Together, these make “small wins” less costly, which may lead to less resistance and greater levels of cooperation. Weick (1984, p. 46) sums this up well:

“A small win reduces importance (“this is no big deal”), reduces demands (“that’s all that needs to be done”), and raises perceived skill levels (“I can do at least that”). When reappraisals of problems take this form, arousal becomes less of a deterrent to solving them.”

These characteristics of small wins also effectively reduce the probability that individuals will actively resist the related changes. The relatively lower consequences and resource demands make small-win projects less important to potential opponents. The activities associated with small-win projects have an important learning component. Essentially, they act as mini-experiments that test theories and preconceived notions. By engaging in a series of small projects, theories of potential gains are tested, as are ideas about barriers and sources of resistance. Increased knowledge lowers the uncertainty associated with change. Interestingly, weaving together small wins can also bring about a series of small advantages. Continuous pressing of small advantages can bring about large gains. Finally, small wins build a track record of success, which increases the credibility of and trust in change agents (Weick, 1984).

To summarize, a small wins strategy reduces anxiety related to big changes while simultaneously increasing knowledge related to the overall change. This strategy can be applied to lowering resistance to change, as discussed in the next section.

IV. RESISTANCE TO CHANGE

As stated earlier, some business school faculty are resistant to the idea of distance learning. While resistance to change is a complex phenomenon with many facets and manifestations (LaPointe and Rivard, 2005), faculty governance makes overcoming resistance to change especially challenging in a university environment. While employees in any organization can resist change, in many universities individual faculty have more formal roles in approving change, which leads to an increased need for cooperative change management.

There are many reasons individuals resist change. Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) delineate several core causes for resistance. People may resist out of self-interest when they believe that they may lose something of value, including time, status or power. Misunderstanding coupled with a lack of trust may also lead to resistance. When people do not understand the implications of a change and believe that their personal and organizational costs will outweigh potential gains, resistance may result. This is especially likely when affected individuals do not trust the initiators of the change. Finally, people may resist when they believe that they will not be able to cope with the change in terms of both behaviors and skills.

Kotter and Schlesinger (2008) offer several strategies for overcoming resistance to change, including:

- Education and communication
- Participation and involvement
- Facilitation and support
- Negotiation and agreement, and
- Manipulation and co-option

Interestingly, these strategies map well to the small-wins approach to change management. Table 1 illustrates how characteristics of the small-wins approach address these strategies.
Table 1: Using Small Wins to Overcome Resistance

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strategies for Dealing with Resistance</th>
<th>Small-Wins Characteristic</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Education and communication</td>
<td>Benefits and requirements of small-wins are easier to communicate. Consequences of small-wins are easier to communicate due to concrete, complete nature.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participation and involvement</td>
<td>Small-wins projects: - allow for broad, low-risk participation. - lower the risk of participation - allow more opportunity for input from participants - require only small requests, which make it easier to gain cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Facilitation and support</td>
<td>Small-wins project provide opportunities for low-risk learning through experimentation. This increases the relevant skill level for participants. Involving more faculty in the small-wins projects also broadens the support network for future projects.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negotiation and agreement</td>
<td>Small-wins projects are less disruptive, which makes it easier to gain cooperation. Small-wins projects require smaller requests, which makes it easier to bring about cooperation.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Manipulation and co-option</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen from Table 1, the small-wins approach simultaneously embodies numerous strategies for overcoming resistance to change. In addition, the individual “small-wins” projects bring about independent benefits beyond their contribution to the overall goal of lowering resistance to distance learning. Because of this, we are engaged in an ongoing series of small-wins distance learning projects with the goal of blended learning being more accepted throughout the school.

V. SMALL WINS APPROACH

Our approach to lowering resistance to distance learning can be summarized as follows. We seek to build a record of success in small, low-risk distance learning projects while simultaneously increasing our expertise in delivering high-quality blended learning courses. The overall goal is to lower resistance to blended learning so that we may ultimately offer entire programs built around a blended learning approach, primarily at the graduate level.

General acceptance for technology-enhanced learning provides a foundation for our approach. Many of our classes use learning management systems (specifically Moodle and Blackboard) to facilitate learning in face-to-face classes. While the depth of use varies from simply providing class notes to online testing, most faculty at the school are comfortable with the idea of using
online technologies to facilitate learning. This general comfort level facilitates our forays into small-wins blended learning projects.

The initial project involved delivering a series of online executive education modules that lead to a certificate in Web localization. This program was launched in 2009 and proved to be successful. The success of this program provided a certain comfort level with the idea of online course delivery, which paved the way for the next project.

Our school offers intersession courses for our part-time graduate programs. As the name implies, these courses occur between regular semesters. They are very intense, meeting three or four times a week. While students like the opportunity to take intersession courses, they often find them challenging, in large part due to the need to be on campus several nights per week. In addition, faculty reported that student engagement is sometimes lacking due to student fatigue, as most students are employed in full-time management positions during the day. This provided a natural opportunity to utilize a blended learning format. In these courses, blended learning is legitimate from a pedagogical perspective. Further, students appreciate the flexibility inherent in blended learning.

Due to these factors, an MBA course was converted to a blended format and delivered in January 2010. This course was an elective course delivered by a single instructor who was interested in blended learning. Having only one instructor involved in the trial required no commitment by other faculty. However, there were informal discussions regarding course design held among interested faculty. This initial trial proved to be successful. Student learning was, at a minimum, equivalent to when the course was offered face-to-face, while student preparation and in class participation was significantly superior to previous instances of the class. In addition, students indicated that they appreciated the flexibility of being able to participate in online discussions on their own schedule. Student satisfaction, as expressed both on an end-of-course survey on blended learning and on course/instructor evaluations was high. Several students subsequently recommended the course to their peers. The instructor’s experience teaching the course with these positive results also encouraged him to continue to develop blended courses (while he was curious about the format prior to offering such a course, he also had significant doubts about his ability to do so effectively prior to the experience). Overall, this experiment can be considered a clear “small win.”

The success of the initial trial opened the door to further experimentation. In order to expand participation and gain further involvement a task force on technology-mediated learning was formed. This group was tasked with developing guidelines for converting courses to blended formats. This can be considered another small-wins project. The clear, concrete and limited goal of developing guidelines for blended learning only in the part-time MBA program required only small demands on the time and efforts of the group members, but had the clear benefit of providing a mechanism for guiding the development of future blended learning courses. At the same time, involvement in the project carried little risk for the participants. Importantly, the discussions involved in this process helped gain agreement regarding the pedagogical legitimacy of blended learning and also provided opportunities to communicate the benefits of blended learning. The guidelines were subsequently shared with the school’s executive committee, which is comprised of department chairs and elected faculty representatives. Gaining the cooperation of this group of leaders is critical to the overall acceptance of blended learning.

In August 2010, two blended learning intersession courses were offered. (These courses were approved by the task force.) Again, both of these were MBA electives and involved only a single instructor (for each course). This second round of courses also proved effective, offering additional evidence of the efficacy of blended learning.

VI. RESULTS AND LESSONS LEARNED (TO DATE)

If accepted, we will present preliminary results of our efforts at the conference. Surveys and student reflection papers provide data regarding their learning and reactions to the blended learning courses. In addition, we are currently developing an entire Masters program that will use
a blended format. We anticipate being through most of the approval process for this program by
the time of the conference. The approval process is heavily faculty driven, so we will be able to
share faculty reaction to the blended format. This will provide insights into the effectiveness of the
small-wins approach as this is a much higher risk project.

To date, the small wins approach has been successful. The small-wins projects so far have been
clearly successful from student, faculty and administration perspectives. Discussions in the task
force and executive committee have helped gain acceptance for blended learning. The concrete
nature of the projects so far facilitates clearly communicating the benefits and requirements of
blended learning, which seems to be lowering resistance.

We have gained a number of insights so far. First, it is important to have the foundation of general
acceptance for technology-enhanced learning. The steadily increasing use of course
management systems represents an important first step in gaining acceptance for technology-
mediated learning. Second, having a core group of interested faculty was critical to the initial
small-wins projects. These faculty were willing to put forth the effort and assume the risks
associated with converting courses to blended formats. Third, having the support of school
administration removed some of the risk of experimentation. Fourth, the initial small-wins projects
should be low risk from the perspective of the faculty at large. Our initial projects put only the
involved faculty at risk. (Of course, there was also risk to students, but our focus is on gaining
faculty acceptance.) Fifth, involving a larger group of faculty in policy making was helpful in
communicating benefits and risks of blended learning to a broader group in a low-risk
environment. Finally, the intersession courses were good "proof of concept" experiments that
provide evidence that our faculty are capable of teaching in a blended mode and that our
students not only accept, but benefit from the blended learning approach. We anticipate being
able to share additional insights as we move forward in our efforts.

VII. CONCLUSIONS

Despite potential advantages, there is still faculty resistance to distance learning, including
blended learning. However, there are approaches that can help overcome this resistance while
simultaneously increasing the institution’s knowledge of these delivery methods. The small-wins
approach described in this paper helps overcome resistance to change through a variety of
methods that map well to accepted strategies. In our experience, the small wins approach is low
risk and effective in bringing about important institutional change with minimal resistance.

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