Aligning Service to Mission: Managing Technology in the Language Center and Across Campus

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At a time when we are all being asked to do more for less, when we're feeling the pressure to be on top of the latest and the greatest while still providing the best from the past, and when someone is pushing yet another new technology but not giving sufficient time to digest it thoroughly, it is easy to feel overwhelmed, stretched short, run ragged and burned out. Similarly, my colleagues and I wondered why we were constantly finding ourselves reacting to each individual crisis as it arose, rather than being able to influence the outcome and create change before crisis hit. We were struggling to maintain every traditional language lab service, while exploring and taking on every tool, trend, and technology just so the LRC would appear to be on edge of innovation and, thus, still be relevant to the 21st century university – not to mention be able to justify space, staff lines, and expenditures. Too-often we were ending up in contentious conversations with administrators trying to explain why a mere "language lab" should be involved in a cool new initiative. Seem familiar?

We all know the coping mechanisms and improvised solutions: complain to everyone and anyone who will listen, attempt to pack even more work into a 60 hour work week, be crabby, argue, fight back, be indignant, wax sanctimonious, withdraw to academic argument, give up our private lives, ignore our families, bring our families to work, or take work home trying to combine both. You name it; we've all done it. These immediate reactions can be cathartic or comforting, but they aren't solutions. For despite the emotional release or immediate salve-like effect, they don't address any of the issues stretching us thin or overwhelming us. Thankfully, we are not powerless in the process. There is significant worth in seriously examining which services we offer, what programs we provide, how we choose to invest time and energy on new initiatives, and why we decide to keep a particular mainstay. By changing the way we

approach work and by aligning service with mission, we can incorporate answers to the why's, what's and how's into everything we do. And most importantly, at the University of Michigan LRC, we have discovered we can, even in small ways, influence the outcome and create change before crisis hits. We are still busy... and still do stress out, but everything we do has been given context making the work more purposeful and we have more structures in place to help us manage.

The Process: In order to begin talking about aligning service with mission, everyone involved in the organization has to be willing to risk abandoning the status quo and has to be willing to strive for true, inspiring, rejuvenating change — what Quinn calls "Deep Change". While change is usually highly intimidating, dealing with it is fundamentally based in common sense. To accomplish deep change, an organization needs to know where it is, decide where it wants to go and why, and create an environment in which new approaches and new ideas are not something to be feared and in which all participants are empowered to move forward.

Ultimately, the thing driving all aspects of deep change is your mission: why do you do what you do? what drives the unit's passion? Contrary to common belief, a mission statement isn't about the specifics of what you do, but rather the reason, the why, for the specifics... that which helps you decide what new innovations and initiatives make sense. An example from Zingerman's Deli in Ann Arbor actually illustrates this perfectly. Their mission statement from which all guiding principles are derived is: "We share the Zingerman's experience selling food that makes you happy, giving service that makes you smile, in passionate pursuit of our mission showing love and caring in all our actions to enrich as many lives as we possibly can." (Weinzweig 2003). This statement is the compass that allows every worker in the deli to measure whether she or he is on track: Am I doing what I'm supposed to be doing? Should we be doing something differently, if we don't feel entirely successful? Should we add new products and services? [In the presentation, we will examine some features of language center mission statements.]

Once one has a notion of mission, the tendency is to follow fairly traditional approaches to strategic planning and outlining steps to get implement future plans. The University of Michigan LRC staff and other groups I've been involved with have started down the path of traditional strategic planning, only to get bogged down by details and side-tracked by immediate needs – the daily fires that just can't wait for a month-long or semester-

long planning process. In the Spring Educause Review, Voloudakis provides an overview of a new approach, which focuses on the need for flexibility: the adaptive enterprise, the adaptive organization. An adaptive enterprise or adaptive organization focuses on strengths and build capabilities to rapidly adapt to changes in faculty demands, instructional needs, market dynamics, shifting technology, and unforeseen events (Voloudakis 2005, 46). Rather than sitting down and planning in an abstract way isolated from day to day tasks, an adaptive organization thinks about "planning as a continuous process" allowing an organization to get closer to the unknowable future, helping members of the unit be aware of arising circumstances and watching for the signs of new needs. It puts the organization in a position to rapidly respond and adapt and creates a living plan, an ongoing process that involves user interaction, collaboration and feedback (Voloudakis 2005, 50).

The LRC has been fairly successful combining the two processes. By allowing mission to set the context, day to day planning, assessment of activities and introduction of new services can be evaluated in relation to the context. Does this particular activity fit with the mission? Thus, this is the beginning of alignment. However, merely deciding whether an initiative or service fits with the mission doesn't mean that it will necessarily be successful and completed and, thus, be a true fit — truly aligned. In the real world, there are two key determining factors: a budget model supporting sufficient flexibility (to be discussed briefly in the presentation) and communities of support, also known as communities of practice.

The notion of communities of practice comes up in many places, but my favorite comes from John Seely Brown's exploration of how technology creates new ways of learning and working. Much of what he argues also applies to how people working with technology can work better together if they focus on the fact that understanding is social constructed and shared within communities of practice (Brown 2000, 15). Aligning service with mission is only successful when the Language Center, reaches out beyond the confines of the unit and participates with other units striving to align their work with their mission. "Knowing is brought forth in action, through participation – in the world, with other people, around real problems." (Brown 2000, 15) "Informal learning... involves the joint construction of understanding around a focal point of interest, and one begins to sense how these cross-linked interest groups, both real

and virtual, form a rich ecology for learning." (Brown 2000, 19). Different groups with similar mission-driven interests and needs will be much more successful in creating deep expertise on any particular subject or initiative, because deep expertise "requires the explicit knowledge of a field, the practices of its community, and the interplay between the two" (Brown 2000, 15). In other words, we can do better, more effective, more creative work if we are able to join together in cross-linked groups of interest and create communities of practice.

While I wish I could claim those of us in the UofM LRC were smarter than everyone else and happened to discover the success of adaptive planning before management experts and planning professionals, but it is sheer dumb luck and a lot of smart colleagues, we've successfully tapped into what really is based in common sense. Only in looking back, do immediately recognize the principles and terms for what we were naturally doing. Not everyone needs to rely on luck. There are steps a department can take to minimally communicate about needs, manage change, and improve morale. The rest of this presentation will outline the steps you can take at your institution to align your own unit's services with mission and connect in a commons environment with other units. I will share the ways in which the Language Resource Center staff at the University of Michigan has been involved in a variety of efforts to change the way we work, plan, teach, budget, and manage facilities – within the language center, across the college, and across the entire campus. Our experiences and lessons learned will be illustrated through five case studies:

Case Study 1: The LRC as Member of Teaching with Technology Collaborative and the Annual Enriching Scholarship Program – a grassroots effort to promote academic technology and encourage sharing of ideas and resources across colleges in the university, which organizes and offers a week-long event each May (after the regular academic year is finished) filled with over 120 workshops, demonstrations, talks, showcases, practica, and hands-on exploration sessions.

Case Study 2: The LRC as Partner in the College Teaching Support Group a loose confederation of College support units who work together to leverage wide areas of knowledge and deep understanding of academic needs of specific fields in order to advise College Operations and to coordinate the ways in which new technologies are adopted and determine which ones will be installed in College-managed classrooms and labs.

Cast Study 3: Partnerships to Introduce and Manage College Video Conferencing Services — how personal networks lead to initiation of collaborative efforts to provide new mobile videoconferencing services across College departments without overburdening any single unit's staff or budget.

Case Study 4: The Provost's Call for IT Commons and the Grass-Roots Response of AT Commons – after the Provost's constitution of an official IT Commons group charged to break down barriers between Colleges and University level infrastructure and major IT units, many technology professionals including several people from the LRC felt the academic side of technology was being ignored and thus, created their own grassroots commons groups for individuals from departments and academic technology units across the University to share knowledge and provide professional development.

Case Study 5: North Quad: a New Kind of Building — the design of a new campus building, part student residence and part publicly accessible academic building, which will be able to evolve over the life-span of the building in order to support the new ways future students will prefer to learn, and in which units like the LRC will be able to promote innovative exploration in communication, media, and global communities across disciplines, across Colleges, across generations, across academic boundaries.

Although LRC staff members have been involved in all of the above initiatives, it must be stressed we were not alone in our efforts and, in many cases, someone from another unit must be given credit for convening the groups. In addition, the groups were often motivated to meet for completely different reasons and each effort was entirely independent from the others. Nevertheless, each initiative ultimately has been successful because participants examined and explored their own services and constituencies, identified commonalities in needs and similarities in services, found points allowing complementary effort, and were able to build on deep expertise created across the community. Without explicit mandate, we created a process by which services across units were better aligned with University and College missions, and benefits resulted from having access to a wider range and deeper levels of support.

By breaking out of the isolation of the "language lab silo", the LRC has been able to identify areas in which we don't need detailed staff expertise or don't need to make departmental level

purchases. We are able to focus on resources closest to the heart of our mission and, yet, are able to rely on newly found colleagues in other units to facilitate our constituents' access to maximally broad and widely diverse services and technologies. By aligning services across multiple units to address College and University missions, we have also been able to leverage the strengths of individual units to implement change across the college, and have strengthened collaboration across the university. Finally, we've found alignment is a fundamental component to managing change and the chaos that accompanies daily life at a University. Aligning services more closely with mission is not a panacea (and a variety of new challenges inevitably arise from any new approach), but we've discovered this is a surprisingly positive way to affect change and create a spirit of cooperation. With the benefit of hindsight, we can indeed see how significantly things have changed — our approach to services, budgeting, technology, student training, customer service, working with faculty and collaborating with other units is radically different from the way things were 6 or 7 years ago. And at least so far, we're finding we able to adapt and react better, and thus serve the ever-evolving needs of faculty and students at the University of Michigan more effectively. ◆

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