

Flip that Meeting: Online Consensus Building in an Academic Department

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The speed of technological advances and innovations has pushed higher education to innovate. Within this context, an academic department set out to revisit its vision and mission. Taking a flipped approach, the department modified its way of prioritizing discussion topics and utilized online, anonymous tools to seek participant consensus on topics to discuss in a face-to-face retreat. This study collected data in three rounds of online activities and eight individual participant interviews. Results indicate that consensus was achieved, inclusiveness was experienced, new insights were gained, and initial empathy was built. However, the new approach raised questions regarding efficiency and group communication. Opportunities and challenges with online tools, anonymity in groups, and faculty time are discussed.

Keywords: flipped meeting, consensus building, Delphi, online anonymity, asynchronous

Introduction

The speed of technological advances and innovations has changed every aspect of our lives. Pressured by an ever changing environment and learner demand, coupled with an increasing scarcity of resources, higher education faces its most challenging era to date. In a highly complex yet competitive environment, what can higher education in general, and individual academic departments in particular, do to persist, innovate and remain relevant?

In spring 2019, one academic department allocated a day-long retreat to address its long-term vision and mission. To make this retreat effective, the two faculty members of the department volunteered to design and facilitate a consensus building process prior to the retreat. The new design was inspired by the flipped classroom approach in which students consume material outside of class, and class time is used for active learning activities. Similarly, in order for faculty to come to the retreat prepared, the meeting was flipped. Employing asynchronous, online tools, participants provided input through a consensus building process to identify the issues facing the department and prioritize topics to be discussed at the meeting. The question guiding this study was: What was the impact of flipping a meeting to have initial discussions and consensus building prior to the face-to-face meeting?

Background

Flipped Model

In a flipped classroom, students learn new material outside of class, often through reading or videos. Class time is reserved for higher order activities such as problem-solving, discussion, or debates to apply and deepen that knowledge (Brame, 2013). The flipped model has been well documented in classroom settings, and has been shown to improve learning performance (Bhagat, Chang, & Chang, 2016), increase student satisfaction (Bösner, Pickert, & Stibane, 2015), engage students (Khanova, Roth, Rodgers, & McLaughlin, 2015), improve critical thinking (van Vliet, Winnips, & Brouwer, 2015) and enhance application skills (Liou, Bhagat, & Chang, 2016). Less however is known about the impact of flipping other types of academic situations such as faculty meetings.

Delphi Technique

The Delphi method was developed in the 1950s by the RAND corporation when working on defense research. The Delphi technique as defined by RAND states:

The Delphi technique entails a group of experts who anonymously reply to questionnaires and subsequently receive feedback in the form of a statistical representation of the "group response," after which the process repeats itself. The goal is to reduce the range of responses and arrive at something closer to expert consensus. (RAND, n.d., p. 1).

The technique is useful for addressing complex issues and avoids typical pitfalls of conventional committee action (Yousuf, 2007). It is also well suited to the online environment as face-to-face meetings can be emotionally laden due to their goal-related activities, social interactions and status dynamics (Rogelberg, Scott, & Kello, 2007). Anonymous, online modes of communication may allow participants to "express facets of themselves without fear of disapproval and sanctions by those in their real-life social circle" (Bargh, McKenna, & Fitzsimons, 2002, p. 34). Online interactions may also negate the need for "surface acting" where one modifies "their outward expression of emotion to fulfil standard norms concerning emotional expression in the workplace" (Shanock et al., 2013, p. 460) or not speaking up to avoid upsetting leaders or supervisors (Bryant & Cox, 2006). Surface acting in face-to-face meetings has been found to be partially attributable to hierarchical status disadvantages (Shumski Thomas, Olien, Allen, Rogelberg, & Kello, 2018). But online settings have been found to mediate the participation inequalities found in face-to-face meetings caused by the dominance of higher status and higher expertise group members (Dubrovsky, Kiesler, & Sethna, 1991).

Consensus

Delphi is a common method for achieving consensus. However, what constitutes consensus is not always clear (Diamond et al., 2014). Those experienced in consensus building agree that groups should strive for unanimous agreement, but settle for majority agreement that attempts to meet the interests of all stakeholders (Susskind, McKearnen, & Thomas-Lamar, 1999). In this regard, a successful consensus building is a process in which varying opinions can be discussed and an action plan agreed upon (Innes, 2004). Striving for consensus, even if not achieved, supports

collaboration and makes agreements more likely to work in the future (Straus, 2002). Because agreements made via consensus involve input from various stakeholders, they are more likely to be high quality, perceived as fair, and include more creative, innovative ideas (Innes & Booher, 1999; Susskind et al., 1999). However, regardless of how "good" an agreement is, it unlikely to gain support if the process is not fair, open, inclusive, accountable, and legitimate (Innes & Booher, 1999). While agreement is often stressed as the ultimate outcome of consensus building, other accomplishments can also come from the process (Innes, 2004).

Method

Context and Participants

This study was conducted with faculty from an academic department specializing in technology integration. The department is made up of ten faculty members, all but one of whom are tenured. Years spent with the department range from less than one year to over 25 years. Eight are instructional faculty, and two have administrative duties and only occasionally teach. The department holds monthly face-to-face meetings to discuss business and an annual day-long face-to-face retreat to address topics in depth. Discussions in these meetings are open format in which any one can speak. Agendas are primarily set by the department chair, with faculty input. In spring 2019, a second annual retreat was scheduled to update the department's vision statement. The authors, two tenured faculty members of the department, volunteered to plan and facilitate the retreat.

Process

Using the flipped model in the month prior to the retreat, a three-round, online, anonymous, modified Delphi process was used as a consensus building technique to generate, comment on and prioritize topics to be focused on at the retreat. Each round used an anonymous Google form to collect data from the faculty participants. The first round opened with a SWOT analysis in which participants were given a week to provide what they saw as the strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats facing the department. The facilitators grouped these statements into categories, and in round two, shared it back to participants using a Google document. Participants were then given a week to select and rank the statements they thought were most important for the department to address, and provide comments as to their rationale. These rankings and comments were shared back in round three, and participants were again given a week to rank and comment on the topics again. The topic that was overwhelmingly voted as most important became a focus of the retreat. After the retreat, the authors conducted individual, semi-structured interviews with each of the other eight faculty members. Interviews were recorded and transcribed, then coded using the software Dedoose and a codebook developed by the authors.

Results & Interpretation

Achieving Consensus

Table 1 summarizes the objectives and results of each round. A total of 93 statements were collected in round 1. Through the next two rounds, statements were further culled and ranked, resulting in a final list with "faculty communication" and "doctoral programs" most highly ranked.

Faculty communication outranked all other topics by a large margin. Participants were positive about the process and felt satisfied that consensus had been reached. As one participant put it, “I think that I agreed with the choices because they were the same choices that I made.” Another participant stated, “I feel we did reach some consensus, probably the best we have ever had.” Participant satisfaction may have been influenced by feelings of mutuality or the feeling that all members have participated as fully as possible in a shared activity (Dutton & Heapy, 2003).

Table 1
A summary of the objectives and results of the consensus building activities

	Objective	Results
Round 1	Information gathering	4x4 table of SWOT input organized into faculty, student, program, and resources categories
Round 2	Ranking of statements within topics	Ranked list of statements under each topic
Round 3	Ranking of topics	Ranked topics list

Creating inclusiveness

Participants were active in the online, asynchronous process, and their input was thoughtful and thorough. In round 1, a total of 93 statements were provided. The longest statement was 22 words, with 9 average words per statement. In round 2, 32 statements were provided in addition to rankings. The longest round 2 statement was 185 words, with 50 average words per statement. In round 3, 11 statements were provided in addition to final rankings. The longest round 3 statement was 250 words, with 88 average words per statement. As the process progressed toward consensus, fewer but longer, more substantive statements were provided.

The online, anonymous, asynchronous format garnered positive reaction. In terms of effectiveness, one participant stated, “I do think more ideas and solutions came, bubbled to the top, than we would have, if had we done it in the old fashioned way of just discussing.” Participants appreciated the anonymity of the process with one participant explaining, “It's easier to not talk in the whole overall group. There need to be ways to gather input from everyone that isn't just in the big open overall group, obviously that isn't working for everyone for every topic.” One participant contrasted the freedom they felt in the online, anonymous format to concerns they had felt in face-to-face meetings about being “too outside the norm,” and having to “be mindful about how others might think” Another participant appreciated both the anonymity and ability to respond when convenient and said, “These pre-activities were the place that we can talk about [and] share what we have thought about, without the limitations of our time. And then, without wondering what other people think about.”

Gaining New Insights

Obtaining new perspectives and insights is one of the most critical elements of any breakthrough or innovation (Kelley, 2001). A new insight gained through this process was that faculty communication was an issue, and that participants found it the most important issue to address. In their interview, one participant described the issue this way, "The problem is that a lot of those confident people at speaking out are not very good at including the other people. And the people that are not speaking out are not very confident about inserting themselves in confidence." Consensus was reached that the issue should be addressed, despite varying levels of previous awareness. One senior faculty participant stated, "I didn't realize that, that people were holding back and I wasn't aware, because it's been awhile since I was a junior faculty staff. So I haven't been able to put myself in their shoes." For a participant who had been aware of the issue, they stated, "I was kind of surprised to see that there were some other people in the group who apparently hadn't necessarily noticed these things or weren't aware." Regardless of prior awareness, the online, anonymous process brought the issue to the fore. As one participant put it, "I don't think it would have necessarily come up if we had just not gone through the whole process."

Building Empathy

Faculty communication rising to the top of the priority list seemed to indicate empathy for those expressing the communication concerns. In the retreat, the individual concerns were discussed and possible solutions developed. However, in the individual interviews after the retreat, when discussing the faculty communication issue, some participants expressed differing views with one stating, "It's not our problem," and "I don't know how to fix something for somebody else." Another participant theorized that perhaps those that did not have concerns may think that "because I can speak out, why can't they speak out?" They went on to say, "So I don't think that the empathy is there. But maybe this process created more empathy, more understanding." While the online, flipped process brought the faculty communication issue to light, significantly differing opinions were revealed through the interviews, indicating that building empathy might require further work. This is not surprising as there is a lack of knowledge on specific techniques and practices that can foster empathy in organizations on a daily basis (Koppen & Meinel, 2012). This is in spite of growing emphasis on empathy as a desired trait for teams and workplaces due to its ability to facilitate connectedness and solution building (Pavlovich & Krahnke, 2012) resulting in increased employee satisfaction and commitment (Dutton & Heapy, 2003). The group in this study is relatively small with a total of 10 members. In order to take a user-centered approach to develop a solution that works for all members, a greater level of empathy should be gained (Kouprie & Visser, 2009; New & Kimbell, 2013).

Balancing Between Time and Efficiency

Participants agreed that spending four weeks on consensus building in preparation for a meeting was a luxury. While it yielded new insights and brought the group to consensus on the priority of topics, it was time consuming for participants and the facilitators. On one hand, the time spent was beneficial, as one participant expressed, "I don't think we usually have that same kind of clarity as we had in this last retreat because of all the prep work, the discussions, the different rounds that we had, the iteration that we had prior." On the other hand, faculty are busy and time is valuable. As one participant put it, "You want to have a balance, you can't take forever, right?" In discussing

the tension between time and efficiency, one participant explained, “sometimes the outcome is important, but the process is equally important, and perhaps for expediency sake, sometimes ignored because we have to make decisions, sometimes those decisions come very quickly.” Finding communication methods that are time efficient yet inclusive will continue to be a goal for the department. One participant described it this way, “Obviously the entire department can't make all of the decisions all of the time in a consensus format. That's why we have a chair, we have coordinators, or whatever. But at the same time, how do you share that information appropriately so that people feel comfortable that they have input?”

Discussion & Implications

Opportunities and Challenges of Online Tools

Using online tools to flip a significant portion of the meeting provided time, flexibility and a safe conversation space for participants. The asynchronous nature allowed participation at each person's choice of time and place, while the anonymous nature allowed equal voice in the conversation. The tools and process enabled the department to “put its collective finger on important issues,” and “in a way that suits our field!” as participants agreed. In addition, using online tools permitted the two facilitators, also stakeholders in departmental issues, to participate in the process, an important factor to consider in the spirit of inclusiveness.

For the faculty participants in this study, using online tools for collaboration is part of their daily lives. There was no resistance or technical issues associated with using these tools to facilitate the process. However, for others considering online methods for consensus building, “technology readiness” or the propensity to embrace new technologies (Parasuraman & Colby, 2015) is an important factor to consider. Participants with less experience may question or resist the process. An assessment of attitudes and skills could be helpful and professional development might be necessary.

Opportunities and Challenges of Anonymity in Groups

Anonymity in group decision making can lead to increased contributions, especially those that are critical (Postmes & Lea, 2000). In this case, the comments regarding faculty communication could have been interpreted as critical, however, concern over them prompted participants to prioritize them in their rankings. Because the issue of faculty communication had not been raised before, it was considered by the group to be a new insight. Anonymity as a newly introduced conversation characteristic appeared to provide previously unavailable opportunities for openness within the group.

On the other hand, it is not clear how anonymity may have impacted group cohesiveness, a key characteristic of productive groups (Gully, Devine, & Whitney, 2012; Oliver, Harman, Hoover, Hayes, & Pandhi, 1999). Faculty communication arising as an issue points to rudimentary issues of trust, power and the hierarchy associated with the tenure and promotion process. If participants only feel free to express themselves anonymously, what does this say about this group in particular and the faculty structures of higher education in general? Anonymity's impact on group cohesion is worthy of further investigation.

Opportunities and Challenges of Time

The process described in this study took place over four weeks, more than this group had ever spent in a consensus building activity. The time between each round allowed participants to individually read comments, think, and compose thorough and thoughtful responses. This type of individual work may have been more productive, as face-to-face group discussions have been found to interfere with the ability to develop and maintain productive trains of thought (Nijstad & Stroebe, 2006). While time consuming, the process ultimately resulted in new insights and consensus. Participants appreciated the effort and time spent in the process, but expressed doubts about spending that much time as a regular practice.

Using a multi-round, engaging, text-based process also produced large amounts of data for the facilitators to work with and for participants to review after each round. While the facilitators organized the data of each round, for example into categories and tables, to be transparent they did not interpret or filter it in any way. Data shared back to participants was essentially raw. One participant suggested that the facilitators should have further summarized each round of data. This would increase the facilitators' workload but could reduce time required for participant review, resulting in a more efficient experience. It does however create a tension between time, efficiency and transparency. Should facilitators be endowed with the power of inclusion, exclusion, and interpretation of participant input? How to best summarize and present group responses to ensure adequate interpretation and evaluation is an ongoing question when using the Delphi process (Yousuf, 2007).

Conclusion

The world is changing rapidly and higher education is playing catch up. This department set out to keep itself relevant by revisiting its vision and mission. In order to build consensus, prioritize issues, and create an environment for equal voice, a flipped meeting approach was employed. Overall, participants had positive reactions in the process. With the help of online, anonymous tools, consensus was achieved, inclusiveness was experienced, new insights were gained, and initial empathy was built. While this study is limited to a case study of one academic department, it reveals areas for further investigation. The balance required between time, efficiency and transparency, the impact of anonymity on group coherence, and the delicacy of fostering empathy in the workplace open new research directions.

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