Counting Our Way Up: Centres for Teaching and Learning in the Audit Culture

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Proposed Mini-Description (50-word)

Universities and colleges are facing calls for accountability in an audit culture. This project will explore how educational developers can ensure accountability while maintaining focus on enhancement instead of audit processes. Deliverables include an updated database of teaching and learning centre activities; analysis of staff perceptions; and recommendations moving forward.

Full Description (300-1000 words)

All around the world, institutions of higher education are facing increasing calls for accountability, a thorough review of purpose and place, and more transparency and intentionality behind decision-making. It is quite difficult to – in good faith – argue against this: in Canada, education is supported by the public purse; students bear great financial burden just to attend college and university; and as educational developers, our very mission is to enhance teaching and learning using scholarship and evidence-based practice.

Although these calls for accountability may be intended to promote effectiveness and the proper use of resources, they have translated into a "mania of constant assessment" (Collini, 2010 as cited in Craig, Amernic, & Tourish, 2014), and within a context where accountability has become conflated with auditability. Government agencies, for example, are requiring constant production of evidence from colleges and universities that they are efficient, effective, and relevant, calling for numbers, key performance indicators, benchmarks, and quality assurance protocols, and making it seem as though "only that which is measurable is important" (Apple, 2005). There is an emphasis on transferable skills in "isolation from disciplinary 'content,'" and quantitative metrics for teaching and research productivity, student employability, and satisfaction (MacRury, 2007, p. 123-124). The result of this 'audit culture' is punitive: it reduces the complex social practices of higher education to numbers, eroding trust, dismantling collegiality, limiting creativity, all in favour of quantifiable output (Craig et al., 2014; Shore, 2008; Tsoukas, 1997).

What does this mean for those of us who work in educational development? Educational developers recognize the importance of working strategically to enhance teaching and learning, taking a systems perspective, and enlisting the support of senior administration in order to effect real change (EDC Living Plan, 2016). At the same time, as developers become more influential in the university, the risk of adopting a crude managerial perspective driven by a focus on market forces and efficiencies rather than on high ideals is very real (Gibbs, 2013). The constant need to produce observable traces with which to articulate impact or effectiveness (see e.g., Power, 1994) means that our energies are increasingly directed towards the processes of compliance: counting attendances, numbers of workshops and their durations, monitoring completion rates of curriculum maps and learning outcomes, using big data to contribute to decisions around enrolment and retention, and so on. In efforts to comply with the accountability demand, we become preoccupied with the processes of the audit, rather than the substance of our

activities, and as a consequence, we may very well be subverting the very purposes of accountability: to enhance quality (Apple, 2005; Craig et al., 2014; Power, 1994). Is our choice, as Gibbs (2013) frames it, between having high ideals but being ineffectual, or having wide-spread influence, but losing integrity?

We are seeking funding for the first part of a multi-phased project to explore how teaching and learning centres can become an ethical conscience in an auditable landscape, and what educational developers can do to ensure our work continues to support teachers, advance teaching, and enhance learning, institutionally and nationally. Specifically, how do we work within this culture while embracing a collegial, ethical approach that stays true to our mission of supporting and enhancing teaching and learning? How do we ensure accountability without becoming auditors?

Drawing on a review of teaching and learning centre demographics and practices undertaken by Simmons et al. (2008/9), and Goff's (2012) investigation into conceptions of quality, in Phase 1 we will conduct:
- a qualitative analysis of the missions/goals, activities, and reporting structures and patterns of centres across the country using website data and annual reports; and
- a survey and selected interviews of centre directors, university administrators, and centre staff, to verify collected data and gain a better understanding of centres' role in the audit culture.

From this data, we intend to contribute the following deliverables:
- an updated database of centre structures adding a focus on reporting activity;
- an analysis of centre activities and reporting patterns in the context of the audit culture;
- a review of perceptions of how the audit culture has impacted centre staff and particularly how staff have complied and resisted its influence; and
- recommendations and suggestions for educational developers to navigate the audit culture.

In short, we intend to develop collaborative resources representing institutions across the country that assist educational developers with navigating the audit culture and using data both ethically and strategically.

This project is aligned with the interests and concerns identified in the EDC Living Plan, particularly:
- Facilitate systemic and organizational change (2.3)
- Supporting valid, meaningful, and appropriate assessment of teaching and learning processes, practices, and programs for the purpose of continuous quality enhancement (3)
- Management of teaching centres and institutional teaching and learning portfolios (4.7, 4.8)
- Member Engagement (e.g., better understanding of roles within the context of the audit culture and strategies for professional development)

This research will inform Phase 2 (undertaken with additional funding from alternative sources) where we will further analyze this data to develop resources and foster conversations about how to:
- use learning analytics responsibly and ethically in the context of institutional reporting;
- educate external assessors regarding the value and challenges of existing metrics; and
- propose alternatives or amendments to the current audit culture that will promote true accountability.

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Budget

Description of Budget Item	Cost
1. Personnel Costs	
One Graduate Student Responsibilities will include: • Reviewing centre annual reports and website data and assisting with a qualitative analysis of the missions/goals and activities, and review of structures and reporting patters of CTLs across Canada • Build online survey using Qualtrics (questions provided by investigators) • Conduct a guided primary analysis of data • Transcribe interviews • Contribute to resources and reporting	**$2751.84** **7 hours/week at $28/hour, plus 1.17% benefits over 12 weeks**
2. Other Expenses	
In-kind contributions provided by the Centre for Teaching and Learning, University of Windsor • Meeting room(s) • Equipment (i.e., computers) • Software (i.e., Qualtrics)	$0
Gifts Participants who complete the online survey will be entered into a draw to win a $100 gift card to Chapters Indigo.	$100
Total	$2,851.84

Proposed Timeline (Draft)*
- Submit an application to the research ethics board
- Interview and hire graduate research assistant(s)
- Train and mentor graduate research assistant(s)
- Conduct a qualitative analysis of missions/goals and activities, and a review of the reporting structures and patterns at centres across Canada
- Create online survey
- Disseminate online survey
- Interview key stakeholders and transcribe interviews
- Analyze results of survey and interviews
- Document results, charting the types of reporting that Centres undertake, the forms it takes, and the roles Centres play in institutional reporting

*Timeline will be updated with dates upon receipt of funding schedule.

Agreements

[x] I/We agree to provide the EDC community, who funds this grant, with access to resulting information and resources for which the copyright remains with the author(s).
[x] I/We acknowledge that I/we will submit an interim report and a final deliverable.