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M|I|C/A

Doceo Project Plan

◉ Research   ◉ Strategy   ○ Design   ○ Leadership

Introduction

Distance learning and the technology to support it weren't new in August 2019 when I started my master's program at the Maryland Institute College of Art. But it was new from a perception standpoint for the millions of students working on advanced degrees, all the way down to those just getting to pick out their first lunch box and backpack, who were forced to stay home and learn from their dining room tables.

While we would have been using this technology for our program no matter what, the times we all found ourselves in put a new focus on how effective these tools were for the people who were not just being asked to use them, but were being forced to use them—students and instructors alike. It was in this context that, for one of our final projects at MICA, I focused on building a business case for thinking about distance learning software in a different light.

This course was designed to be a prep for our thesis by creating a business plan to support our final project design concepts. With this project, we should have a coherent case we could present to theoretical stakeholders that defined a problem, connected a business opportunity to human needs, identified any risks that may exist, and proposed a solution with potential timelines.

At this point, I still wasn't sure what I wanted to tackle for my final project, but I knew I wanted to dissect "Canvas," our existing distance learning tool, a bit first.

View the Final Presentation

Photo Credit: edweek.org

Process

My first task was to identify a problem. There were lots of complaints that I and others had with Canvas, but complaints alone can't sustain a problem statement. So I took a hard look at what Canvas aimed to provide as a basic need to their market and what their desired outcome was. I then researched what the market had been experiencing for the past 7-8 months using tools like this and the impacts they had on learning, both positive and negative.

Taking this perspective, I began to work through a number of problem statements that I could build a plan on, then ran that through the filter of what Canvas had made publicly available for their own goals to ensure compatibility with their business model.

"Students that use Canvas for their educational learning platform find it doesn't match their mental model for classwork, leading to difficulty in accessing class materials, submitting assignments, and tracking their progress, resulting in a less engaging learning environment, particularly in a post-COVID world."

My next step was to create a risk analysis, which defined two outcomes that would define success for the project and any risks that would prevent us from reaching those goals. Risks were categorized as either being one of "timing," "political climate," or "execution," and included what could trigger those risks, who would own managing them, and how we might be able to mitigate them.

The most obvious risk at this point was the potential of a vaccine that could be deployed as scale, allowing for the return of students to the classroom before an improved system could be built.

Based on your project pitch, think about the outcomes you and your stakeholders may want to achieve with your project. Create a risk management plan that meets the following criteria:

1. Identify at least 2 outcomes that you believe define success for your client, or stakeholders.
   - A) Deploy an improved version of Canvas that can support K-12 users and their parents
   - B) Create must-have functionality that can support teacher/student interactions post pandemic

2. For each of those outcomes, identify the risks that you believe may inhibit your ability to achieve those objectives.
   - A) Deploy an improved version of Canvas that can support K-12 users and their parents
     1. The distribution of a vaccine before an MVP release that would enable students to return to class in person
     2. Inability to execute on a condensed timeframe
     3. Inability to beat the competition to market
     4. Inability to deliver on functionality, experience necessary to win
   - B) Create must-have functionality that can support teacher/student interactions post pandemic
     1. Inability to build significant market share ahead of a vaccine
     2. Inability to gain footholds in states or districts that require on-site learning
     3. Inability to understand challenges of K-12 distance learning and add necessary functionality

3. Categorize your risks into key categories
   - A) Timing
   - B) Political climate
   - C) Execution

4. Identify the triggers that would initiate your risk occurrence
   - A) Deploy an improved version of Canvas that can support K-12 users and their parents
     1. The distribution of a vaccine before an MVP release that would enable students to return to class in person
        1. *A vaccine announcement and rapid distribution*
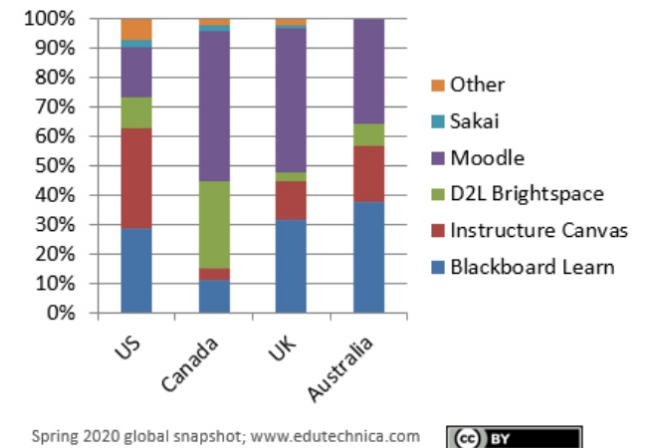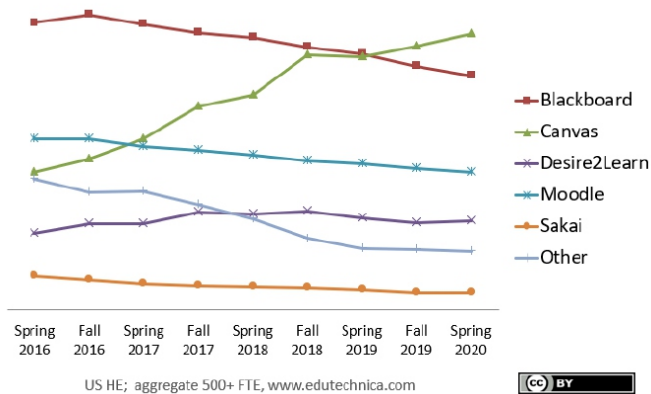   2. Inability to execute on a condensed timeframe

Research

I needed to get a historical perspective on this market and looked to see when it started and who some of the other players were. I also wanted to get a sense of market share. I was able to find sources online that tracked these leaders and plotted share over time.

I spent time reading news reports on the experiences that students, educators, and parents were all having with these tools. Part of my story was that while this may seem like an extreme situation in the moment, there will probably be another disruption in the future. Since the end of the pandemic, this has occurred around the world. For example, in New Delhi, India, there has been a need to conduct classes remotely due to extreme temperatures or high levels of airborne pollution.

I also looked into how tools designed for higher education were being adopted for students of all levels and the technical challenges that may present. The immediate change to this model also had an impact on educators who were not trained to instruct virtually and had to learn new tools as they were learning a new way of working.

From a business model perspective, I identified that Canvas had established itself as a leader by moving to the cloud before its competition, but that this advantage would eventually be lost as competitors reached feature parity with one another.

I finally identified that a UX designed for a younger demographic could be a differentiator by creating an easy-to-use experience that could mature in complexity as students matured. Their data could also travel with them as they moved between schools and could be ready for consideration as they entered a post-secondary world.

Legend: Blackboard, Canvas, Desire2Learn, Moodle, Sakai, Other

US HE; aggregate 500+ FTE, www.edutechnica.com

Legend: Other, Sakai, Moodle, D2L Brightspace, Instructure Canvas, Blackboard Learn

Spring 2020 global snapshot; www.edutechnica.com

	Blackboard Learn	D2L Brightspace	Instructure Canvas	Moodle	Sakai	Other
Institutions	973	369	1147	573	72	244
	28.4%	10.8%	33.4%	16.7%	2.1%	7.1%
Enrollments	5,552,761	2,029,401	6,982,189	1,983,828	493,341	731,907
Average Size	5707	5515	6092	3462	6852	3000

Spring 2020, aggregate 500+ FTE students, www.edutechnica.com

Final Presentation

During reviews with the course instructor, it was brought to my attention that this needed to be my own thing and not just a plan for an existing product.

Whoops.

So, I got to work on creating a brand to support my presentation. I played with a few potential names but landed on "Doceo" (pronounced "Do-see-oh"), which is Latin and means "To Teach." I opened my favorite vector illustration app and got to work on creating logos. The final logo used Futura as the base due to the shape of the "o," which I converted into a head donning a mortarboard and tassel. I used this as a design element that carried through the headings of different sections of the deck where an "o" appeared.

From here, I had to reposition my content in order to focus on Canvas as a competitor, as opposed to the client. Thankfully, this was a fairly easy transition in content. This opened up the ability to be a little more aspirational with my new company's values compared to Canvas's.

A requirement for the project was also to put together a timeline for efforts from research through to delivery. My timeline was a little aggressive based on my past experience. To go from product kickoff, to research, to synthesis, to a firm strategy, to concept creation, to concept validation, to concept refinement, then to having something to engage development with to start writing code is a minimum 9-12 month process. For Doceo was showing MVP being code complete after 6 months which would make an executive leader happy, but which I would say is terribly realistic.

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The Portfolio of Shawn Kenney

Summary

Unfortunately, I'm not sure how well UX is positioned in most organizations to drive this level of thought. Far too often, UX is expected to focus on tactical tasks like handing off mockups to development teams. Furthermore, too many UX professionals find their research skills misused to validate the opinion of an internal stakeholder instead of achieving a deep understanding of the market. UX also runs the risk of alienating other roles within their organizations by taking this work upon themselves. Finally, UX may not have the necessary visibility in the organization to even communicate a vision.

But it doesn't have to be this way.

"Completeness of thought" was a phrase I learned early in my career when reporting to the Chief Product Officer at OEConnection. We weren't trying to check boxes; we were trying to understand the needs of our users and make decisions that would lead to better outcomes for them. When UX has the toolset and organizational positioning to tell the story of how our business can benefit as well, that's when it can have the most impact on our users and our business.

View the Final Presentation