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A story about implementing proactive quality management techniques in eLearning

Once upon a time, in a land not far away, there was a University of Ducks. They lived and worked together in a pond which was in a large valley set between high mountains. The University had been based in the pond for very many years, and its mission was to provide education for ducks on paddling, preening and quacking techniques in order that each duck could live a long and happy life and make his very best contribution to the duck community.

The University ran several courses, but the most popular ones were those that, if you did well in, would increase your chances of finding a mate. The Masters in Advanced Paddling Techniques taught ducks to master the quite considerable skills involved in paddling like crazy underneath and yet appearing calm and unruffled on the top. This was an essential skill in promoting trust in one's potential mate that you could cope whatever the weather and whatever the challenges that came your way.

However, as time went past, more and more ducks were realising that there was more to life than quacking and paddling on the pond. Several enterprising ducks had managed to fly over the mountain tops, to return with exciting reports of strange and different duck societies who had learnt how to build structures, how to find new and exciting ways of entertaining themselves, how to protect themselves against the weather, and how to link up with other duck societies to yet further improve their knowledge. It was reported that the ducks in these far-off lands lived happy and exciting lives and achieved great benefits from the fruits of their labours. The ducks and families in these societies had plenty to do at the weekends; they went to movies, visited cafes and museums, and talked with each other about new and exciting projects.

Well, the University of Ducks had always been quite insular. The Elder ducks in the institution had instilled a long tradition that if one knew how to paddle, preen and quack with poise, then one would find contentment and fulfilment in life. The Elders distrusted any new and challenging influences because they believed that it would give the younger ducks strange ideas and promote discontentment with their lot in life. So they were not happy at the success of some of the younger ducks in flying over the mountain tops. Sooner or later, a duck would not return home, preferring to stay in the far-off lands, which might signal the beginning of the end of their University.

One day, a particularly spirited and enterprising young duck named Edward returned from over the mountains. He was beside himself with excitement. He had managed to

fly to a far-off land that no-one had ever come across before. He explained that, in this society, the ducks had access to all the knowledge that they ever could dream of - on tap, all the time, just like the water in their pond. Edward told how he had seen ducks sitting by strange devices which taught them anything they were interested in. All they had to do was log in to the strange device with their username and password, and they could learn anything they liked from anywhere in the whole wide world.

However there was a catch – because it was from anywhere in the world, the learner ducks didn't necessarily know whether it was of good quality. The teacher ducks reported that they had come across some very disappointing material which really wasn't teaching the learners anything useful at all, and on some occasions was even factually incorrect. This worried the teacher ducks because they found that the learner ducks, both young and old, had acquired an insatiable appetite for exploring the knowledge and weren't always able to distinguish between good and bad. Learners thought that if they saw it on the strange device, it had to be good.

So the Elder ducks listened patiently to Edward and then went and had a private meeting. This just goes to prove, they agreed, that new and challenging influences are not to be trusted and should be avoided at all costs. They resolved to continue teaching their courses as they had always been taught, in classroom lecture sessions on the pond, followed by practical technique testing. The system had worked successfully for very many years, so why shouldn't it continue to do so?

But Edward didn't give up. He told as many ducks as he could about the new ideas and how life could be different and so much more rewarding. He was branded a troublemaker by the Elders and often went off on flying trips over the mountains without permission.

One day Edward carried back an object in his beak. It was a device that one of his contacts in the far-off lands had loaned to him. It contained some examples of the sort of things that other ducks were learning about, and what their societies were like. Edward showed it to everyone. There was almost a revolution. Everyone wanted to have a part in what Edward's device was showing them.

The Elders held an emergency meeting. By the end of the meeting, they had decided - by a narrow majority - that they had to try and move with the times. If they did nothing, all their young promising ducks might fly over the mountains and never return home. The youngsters were thirsty for knowledge and excitement and this could no longer be resisted. They allocated a budget and made plans to buy 200 of the new devices, which they decided to call Web-Techs, as a sign of ducks moving with the times.

Edward was thrilled. Soon they had organised a party to fly over and collect the Web-Techs. With each one there would be an integrated mesh networking facility which allowed the user access to information and knowledge from anywhere in the whole wide world. Expectations were running high.

The delivery party returned with the 200 Web-Techs, and all the ducks started to learn from them. The University had to organise daily rota systems because they were so popular.

The teacher ducks, however were finding it very difficult to keep up. Whilst all the learners had taken to the new devices like ducks to water, the teachers felt terribly threatened, and most of the learners were starting to know more than they did. Gone were the good old days of teaching practical paddling, preening and quacking techniques and being in control. The learners didn't want to watch the teachers every move any more. Learners loved to do their own thing and became more and more challenging to the teachers.

In addition, the weary teachers pointed out, there were the quality problems. Learners were constantly accessing knowledge on the Web-Techs which was a bit dodgy to say the least. The teachers just couldn't keep up with it all, and it was the most difficult thing in the world to explain to a young and enthusiastic learner that some of the knowledge they had found really wasn't going to stand them in good stead in later life.

The Elders held another meeting. Concerned about the problems of quality, they decided to organise themselves. They would build their own courses for the University of Ducks, based on selected material available on the Web-Techs. In doing this, the University would be re-vamping its offerings, keeping up with the times, and also introducing some quality management which would be vital in assisting the teachers to get back in control. The Elders also decided to utilise the talents of many of the brightest learners in building the new courses. Some of the ducks had acquired skills in producing graphics, animated movie clips, and photography, and these would all be utilised in the new courses. The courses would be designed so that learners could learn individually from the devices, in their own time, as well as coming together for group sessions to explore and debate issues with each other and with their teacher. The teachers themselves would acquire new skills in how to facilitate these sharing sessions; instead of just demonstrating techniques that the learners had to copy.

Everybody had their part to play in all the new activity. The teachers had to learn how to facilitate group sessions and how to manage what information the learners should best be introduced to, and in what order. The students contributed with their new skills and ideas on how they wanted to learn and what would be most fun and stimulating. Ducks emerged with new occupations, producing graphics, movies and photos, to assist with the learning. In particular, an occupation emerged called 'in-duck-ional designer' (ID), which assisted the teacher in bringing together all the different elements in order to reach the learning outcomes that the teacher wanted. Another new occupation was 'mesh networking technician' which was responsible for the maintenance and support of the mesh network which connected together all the devices and allowed them to interact with one another, and with the outside world. The finance ducks had to keep an eye on the budget to ensure that it was spent only on designing the very best courses which would deliver the required outcomes for the benefit of the University, their duck society and those societies further afield. The Elder ducks lent a watchful eye over the whole operation to ensure that the transformation of the education offered by the University of Ducks was aligned with their evolving goals and objectives.

Everyone was learning very fast, and it was an exciting, exhilarating and stressful time; the sheer amount of change to the traditional way of doing things made many of the ducks feel that they were 'out of their comfort zone'. Plus there were some additional

problems which they had to address, and which required some strong leadership. In endeavouring to produce the new courses, each of the new occupations was evolving, with its own specialised skills and viewpoints. Everyone had a different role to play in the overall process of producing new courses, yet all of them had to co-ordinate and work together. Achieving this was sometimes very challenging. Since all the teachers were designing new courses, there was a lot of pressure on the in-duck-ional designers. Often teachers would provide their requirements at very short notice and expect virtually instant results, which they then wanted to use to teach with immediately. Many times, the IDs would deliver a course to the teacher, which wasn't really how he was imagining it. Then there would be a great flapping of wings and commotion on the pond as each side blamed the other – the ID saying that teacher hadn't explained what he wanted properly, and that a lot of time had been wasted; the teacher saying that the ID hadn't understood his requirements correctly. Sometimes the teacher would start to teach the course and the learners thought that it was little different than accessing knowledge in their own ways from the Web-Techs. Then, they would get very noisy and difficult to manage.

Alternative A: So, what do you think happened next? What are the problems which need addressing? What are possible solutions to these problems? (Dilemma)

Alternative B: (Happy Ending)

In designing their new courses, the University learnt some very important lessons. As the ducks got more and more used to working together, they gradually produced a diagram of the process that they had to go through in order to analyse and specify the teaching requirements, and then design, develop, and implement a new course. This included a prototyping step where the IDs demonstrated the 'look and feel' and overall design of the course under development, so that the teachers could see if it was meeting their expectations and give feedback. Everybody began to understand the critical need to train, prepare and support the teachers for their new role. Lastly they all realised that it was essential to evaluate what both the teachers and the learners thought of the courses, how effectively the learning outcomes were being met, and what lessons about its development and implementation they could apply to future courses.

Identifying the whole process pictorially allowed them to identify where they all fitted in, and what essential steps were required in order to produce a high quality result. They all became more and more adept at using their new skills in a co-ordinated way and understood how to pull together to produce some really fantastic results.

Learning had never been so good at the University of Ducks.

Moral: if you want to implement successful eLearning, get all your ducks in a row and understand the process – or series of steps – that you must go through in order to produce a quality result. The process can be used to co-ordinate the teamwork of all the different role players and facilitate them all pulling together in a concerted way.