Customized executive learning: a business model for the twenty-first century

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper seeks to elaborate on the drivers underpinning the rise of the Platform Model in customized executive learning and to explain the guiding philosophy underpinning this model.

Design/methodology/approach – The study followed directives for case-based research, and was based on multiple sources of evidence: extant literature, archival data, industry publications, interviews and direct observation. Common issues were identified and used to build theory and make the concepts generic enough to be communicated to executive education professionals. Findings were shared and validated with professionals, and with managers within the human resource and organizational development departments of corporate firms.

Findings – The emergence of the Platform Model for executive education has been driven by four key developments –an explosion in the number of intellectual free agents who work outside or beyond the permeable organizational boundaries of academic institutions; the increasing recognition of open collaboration as an engine of customization and innovation; the pervasive spread of information and communication technologies that are enabling virtual teams to deliver integrated educational offerings; and the demand of clients that educational offerings should deliver outcomes by matching intellectual resources with their needs, and not vice versa.

Originality/value – The paper describes a recent trend in the ongoing evolution of approaches towards the design and delivery of executive learning. The Platform Model for executive learning is based on the existence of what has become a two-sided network, entailing a triangular set of market relationships. On one side of this network are the individuals and firms that possess specialist skills and expertise, and on the other side are organizational clients seeking learning solutions. The need for these two groups – the network's "sides" – to interact with each other efficiently has created the opportunity for the emergence of Platform Intermediaries.

Keywords Business schools, Communication, Intermediaries, Learning, Education

Paper type Viewpoint

Introduction

The traditional world of customized executive education for senior managers of large corporations has involved top-tier business schools leveraging their faculty resources to provide "tailored" educational offerings to client firms. Top-tier business schools are defined as those graduate management schools that are generally in the top 25 of international business school rankings for executive education programs, as conducted by organizations such as *Financial Times* and *Business Week*. Faculty at these top-tier institutions conduct research that is published in refereed academic journals, and this research is then communicated to management practitioners in a classroom setting. This approach has many strengths – it enables the structured analysis of business

problems, and the development of theory that can be applied for growth and competitive advantage. But it also has disadvantages – many core research faculty have a primary interest in publication for their academic peers rather than for managers, and in some graduate management schools teaching is seen as a much lower priority. Furthermore, most top-tier business schools work on a proprietary model in which they base their executive education offerings exclusively on in-house resources and rarely go beyond the boundaries of the institution in search of intellectual capital or alternative learning methods. This final aspect is not unique to business schools – it is the dominant model in most professional services firms.

More recently there has been the emergence of a new customized executive learning model – what we term the "Platform model" – that is being leveraged by some of the world's largest corporations. These "platforms", such as Executive Learning Partnership, "the world we work in", Duke Corporate Education, (the for-profit arm of Duke University) and the Lorange Institute (founded by Peter Lorange, former Dean of IMD) represent the emergence of new intermediaries to link intellectual talent on the one side, and client organizations on the other. The emergence of the platform model for executive education has been driven by four key developments:

(1) an explosion in the number of intellectual free agents who work outside or beyond the permeable organizational boundaries of academic institutions;

(2) the increasing recognition of open collaboration as an engine of customization and innovation;

(3) the pervasive spread of information and communication technologies that are enabling virtual teams to deliver integrated educational offerings; and

(4) the demand of clients that executive learning interventions should deliver outcomes by matching intellectual resources with their needs, and not vice versa.

This article describes the platform model, elaborates on the drivers underpinning the rise of the platform model in customized executive learning (instead of executive education), and explains the guiding philosophy underpinning this model. The article compares top-tier business schools in general to the platform model while acknowledging that specific platforms and business schools may have specific features or approaches which differ from the archetypal organizational forms as outlined in the article.

The rise of the platform model
The platform model for executive learning recognizes the existence of what has become a two-sided network, entailing a triangular set of market relationships. On one side of this network are the individuals and firms that possess specialist skills and expertise, and on the other side are organizational clients seeking learning solutions (see Figure 1).
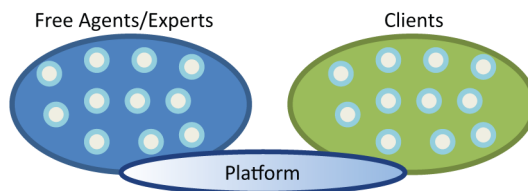

Figure 1.
The two-sided market for executive learning

The need for these two groups – the network's "sides" – to interact with each other efficiently has created the opportunity for the emergence of intermediaries – what technology-based industries commonly call platform providers. The Platform embodies an architecture – a design for services, and infrastructure facilitating network users' interactions – all at low-delivered cost. In technology-based industries the platform also provides a set of rules; that is, the protocols, rights, and pricing terms that govern transactions. But in the executive learning setting, we use the term guiding philosophy rather than rules.

Platform providers in this new executive education model are organizations that build client relationships by becoming trusted advisors, and act as open gateways to introduce corporations to a linked network of professionals. These organizations can be small, such as The Netherlands-based Executive Learning Partnership and "the world we work in" or substantially bigger in terms of permanent staff and facilities, such as the Lorange Institute in Switzerland. Many of these organizations have been created by former faculty and clients of leading business schools, who have identified an emerging opportunity in the shifting world of customized executive learning.

The key difference between these platform providers and traditional business schools (see also Table I) is that while the intermediary does drive deadlines, responsibilities and activities in linking both sides of the network, the intermediary does not necessarily own the client relationship. Rather, the intermediary identifies talented program directors and faculty within the supply-side of the network and leadership roles are distributed per project. Second, the supply side of the network does not have defined boundaries (as in most business schools) but is open to bring in relevant talent based on the requirement of the client organization. Third, there is an emphasis on the linked network of free agents on the supply side of the network

Dimension	Business school	Platform model
Reputation	Brand as quality guarantee	Track record of professionals and intermediary referrals as quality guarantee
Boundaries	Clear institutional boundaries	Immediate access to professionals
Purpose	Primary aim is research	Primary aim is a program with impact
Starting-point	Academic content-led	Broad range of perspectives and professionals included, underpinned by academic insight
Orientation	Teaching, faculty orientation	Facilitation, participant and result orientation
Connections	Connecting disciplines	Integrating holistic learning experience
Collaboration	Collaboration has no incentive	Multiplicative effects of open collaboration
Proposition	Leading edge knowledge and "right" answers	Further strategy execution and people development
Ownership	Proprietary	Shared

Note: Compare and contrast creates clarity, but it also creates "archetypes". Many Business Schools and Platforms do display some features of the other organizational form. This Table aims to set the two business models apart as much as possible

Table I.
Comparing the business school and Platform model for executive learning

bringing in multiplicative effects, with an emphasis on the sharing of intellectual capital between peers in a collaborative environment. Experts are encouraged to share their talent for the benefit of the entire network, rather than seeing knowledge as something to be retained and protected by the individual. This also has the effect of growing the intellectual capital of the network as a whole, thereby reinforcing the attractiveness of the entire supply side of the network. Fourth, the boundary-less Platform allows for clients to connect with faculty as and when they want. Fifth, collaboration between the Platform Provider and members of the supply side of the network is often done virtually as "faculty" and other program contributors can be widely distributed. Finally, some of the new Platform Providers that we have researched actually subsidize one side of the network – the advisory role to clients is often provided on a subsidized basis, with incomes generated from revenue sharing or commissions from the supply side of the network once projects are contracted.

The guiding philosophy of the new platform model for executive learning is based on these differences and will be further explained after the main drivers of the platform model have been elaborated.

Drivers of the platform model
Rise of the free agent
One of the most important drivers of the evolution of the platform model for executive learning has been the explosion in the number of "free agents". Free agents are knowledge workers who determine their own work portfolio and integrate their own work/life tradeoffs, without a contractual commitment to a single employer. Daniel Pink, the best-selling author on the changing world of work, asserts that many of these free agents eventually feel more secure with a number of clients and a network of relationships of likeminded professionals who support their growth and business development, rather than one boss (Pink, 2001). The growth of the number of free agents reflects the changing attitudes of Generation Y, valuing personal and professional development, (virtual) teamwork, equal relationships with clients, colleagues and contract partners, and living an integrated life.

In the executive education world the free agent has often once worked for a business school or a top consultancy firm. In top consultancies many of the consultants struggle with the institutional norms and politics and the limited flexibility around career and work/life, and choose to strike out on their own once they have acquired skills and competence. The classic divide between tenure track academics, non-tenure track faculty and "administrative staff" often defines the career possibilities in business schools. Academics who have not chosen the tenure-track route, can be marginalized or even forced-out of traditional business school hierarchies, regardless of their executive education capabilities. Some business schools create "professional" faculty roles for non-tenure track academics, but all too often these positions are viewed as "second-class" by the permanent faculty group, thereby alienating this group of professionals. Talented executive educators often choose a free agent role wholly or partially outside the boundaries of the business school. Their commitment and values are with the clients, the learning process, the delegates and their disciplinary know-how, and they value the collaboration in the kind of open network discussed here.

In "Leading clever people" Goffee and Jones (2007) describe some of the characteristics of the kind of "clever people" discussed above: "they know their worth; they are interested in their profession rather than the corporate hierarchy, the job titles,

the organizational 'rain' and promotions; they recognize insincerity immediately and respond negatively to it; they are well connected and easily bored". But contrary to the assumption by Goffee and Jones that "clever people need the organization's resources, systems and discipline as much as it needs them", we have found that in executive education specifically, and professional services at large, this dependency is decreasing. The growth of executive learning intermediaries has been a catalyst of this trend.

The power of open collaboration
Technology-based industries have shown the potential of open collaboration through the development of software such as Linux. Not only did the Linux movement create a new operating system, the initiative also revealed how an open collaboration model focused on customization and innovation could deliver results, which could have never been achieved through proprietary models.

Open collaboration in platforms for executive learning is first of all driven by clients who want to work with the professionals that meet their needs and whom they trust. Increasingly this trust is based on the mutual relationship as well as the track record and capabilities of the people involved. It requires from each professional to be open to build these relationships with clients and colleagues from other areas or institutions. More about this topic under the fourth driver of the platform model: "changing client demands".

A second major driver of open collaboration are the free agents themselves as described in the previous section. Many of them realize that their connections with peers and networks are their life-line to their own professional and business development. Contrary to institutional environments there is less advantage gained from keeping new methods and concepts to oneself. Sharing knowledge and skills demonstrates your willingness to collaborate openly and is even an implicit standard by which "free agents" are evaluated and gain work. Collaboration becomes a platform to showcase your ability among peers who may in fact also become your client. It creates a dynamic virtual environment of requests, articles, videos, client information and learning methods floating the web through e-mail, organized on share points and discussed by phone and face to face. Ultimately open collaboration becomes most effective in the face of an immediate client request. These people mobilized across the globe, the ideas generated and the client open to new ways of working are the enablers of a new era of collaboration.

Technology as enabler
The technical enabler of this open global collaboration and the platform model are the interactive internet tools which have become widespread and easy to use for non technical people – e-mail, Voice Over IP (VoIP), free video conferencing, google academic and open-source shareware. The availability of these low cost communication tools for telephone, videoconferencing and document sharing, allow collaboration networks to get connected, to communicate at low cost and to share and co-create intellectual capital. This has dramatically reduced the transaction costs of managing groups of people who are not co-located, but also created new demands in terms of project management and open communication.

The costs of forming an international collaborating network of faculty have decreased dramatically with travel minimized to the actual delivery of programs, in which case the global spread minimizes client costs even further. The high tech tools

also require a different mindset in building relationships: the value of careful and concise referrals increases and the basic assumption must be one of trust.

Given the stakes related to the "virtual" sourcing of a client engagement, a significant tacit judgment has to be made about each relationship. This increases the significance of the role of the network intermediary who's knowledge of the skills and capabilities of the free agents on the supply-side of the network – wherever they might be located in the world – become invaluable to clients on the buy-side of the network.

Changing client demand
Executive learning programs have increasingly moved away from classroom-based, case study led knowledge transfer over the last two decades. It is widely accepted that programs need to demonstrate their return on investment (ROI) through the enhancement of the practical skills of executives who will use new insights and knowledge to drive organizational growth and change. The requirement to prove ROI has led to a much closer involvement of clients in the design of programs and generally a higher level of sophistication among clients. They know what creates a real impact and they will ask for it regardless of departmental or institutional domains. This increasing sophistication of client demand now pushes the world of customized executive learning to customize and innovate beyond the boundaries of a single institution as well. The client may request different providers to work together, previous consultants' work to be integrated or sustained, or certain professionals to be included in the offering because of their know-how, skill or relationship with the company. Concurrently we see sophisticated clients asking to integrate different disciplines, learning methodologies and research approaches. These requests often demand for business schools to achieve collaboration across their different departments – something which has been historically difficult to achieve, and we elaborate more on this in the accompanying Appendix 1 "The dilemma for business schools". Increasingly the skills of open collaboration and innovation have become differentiating capabilities of a customized executive education provider; in practice these capabilities can hardly be attributed to a single institution.

Clients have also become familiar with the benefits of working with professional practices outside the academic domain. They recognize that their executives' development needs cover the physical, emotional and spiritual well being as well as the intellectual strengths of executives. In order to meet these demands a broad range of professionals from literature, the performing arts, media, wellness and sports bring expertise to cover the physical, emotional and spiritual learning needs. Clients understand that "non-academic" program elements can create a high impact, if they are well integrated in the overall design and linked to the academic contribution. The role of the platform intermediary is to bring entirely different worlds, mindsets and people together – as shown at Figure 2.

The desire to bring together potential sources of expertise and knowledge from a spectrum of sources creates complexity for the client organization, as it is not easy to understand and manage the broad spectrum of skills and capabilities available within the universe of free agents. The platform model is underpinned by intermediaries that have the linkages and processes to bring together clients and experts from the supply-side of the network to create a holistic learning experience. A basic openness and curiosity for these different worldviews is required to make a possible collaboration fruitful, and the earlier mentioned tacit judgment of the intermediary is
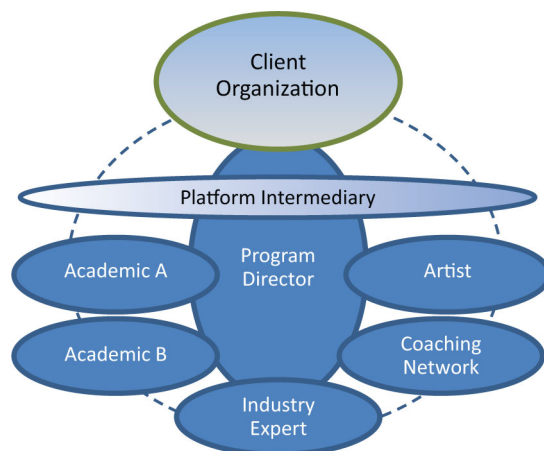
even more crucial in these areas to distinguish those professionals who can translate their profession to the business world.

Finally, in a difficult economic climate clients have become cognoscente of the costs of management development. One former director of customized programs at a top-tier business school says: "companies buy business schools for two reasons – brains and brands". "Brains" refer to the intellectual expertise within the school's academic faculty, while "brand" represents the peace of mind for HR professionals in buying a "trusted" vendor – as well as the associated brand benefits for participants of having attended a top-tier management school. A well known saying from the world of IT in the 1990s was: "Nobody ever got fired for buying IBM". Similarly, a common perception in the corporate world is that HR directors "don't get fired for buying top-tier business schools." In the platform model companies buy the time and resource of all professionals involved plus a fee for the organization and the platform. It is a transparent model without the heavy overheads of permanent faculty and support staff, and often without the fixed costs of a substantial campus, libraries, systems and infrastructure. This means that the platform model has the potential to offer a competitive price/quality ratio when compared to top-tier business schools.

Guiding philosophy
Earlier in this article it was described how the platform model is built around a different view and approach to ownership, organizational boundaries, (virtual) collaboration and, in some cases, the partial subsidization of one side of the network (clients). The model is underpinned by independence, and the role of the intermediary between the two sides of the network is to be impartial and authentic. Rather than trying to fit the client need to the abilities of existing faculty, the approach is solutions oriented and focused on achieving the best outcomes for clients and partners. A prerequisite is that the platform "creates an environment in which. . .clever people can thrive" (Goffee and Jones, 2007). The possibility that people will thrive is enhanced if the platform can link the professionals directly to their commitment, their development and values. The implicit core values of this organizing model are trust, transparency

and continuous learning, Since platforms such as the Lorange Institute, "the world we work in" and Executive Learning Partnership only employ a small core team to run the business, all efforts of the professionals involved, focus immediately on the project at hand. The shared purpose is simple: to make the project a success, without time and resource being wasted on the corporate hierarchy, the institutional norms and politics or strategic behavior to maneuver through the former.

Importantly, network intermediaries view free agents as clients rather than resources. A driver for the platform model is the further development of free agents; to enable them to make a difference in the field that they work in (see Appendix 2).

Limitations of the platform model

The intangible pillars of the platform model like trust, relationships, collaboration and speed and quality of execution are solely dependent on the capabilities and commitment of the professionals involved – it relies not on "locking-in" clever people through formal contracts and formal performance measurement tools, but rather "locking-on" people through a deeper sense of commitment, reciprocity and shared purpose.

In "the Individualized Corporation" Ghoshal (1999) describes organizations based on intangibles: people, process, purpose. These intangibles explain the key strengths of the platform model in terms of speed, entrepreneurship, agility and passion, but also the potential shortcomings:

(1) *People*. Relationships and (virtual) collaboration are the cornerstones of each team working on a client project. The subtlety of the difference between really openly collaborating and "going through the motions" is sometimes hard to detect. Yet "going through the motions" clearly is not good enough. The platform model is built on working with professionals who are self aware, (overly) confident and deeply uncertain and anxious to deliver good performance, and do at least as well as their peers on the program. Client expectations, participant evaluations and the free agent status may add to this insecurity. In order to deliver excellent programs these all need to be overcome individually as well as a team. It requires careful relationship building, continuous encouragement of mutual feedback, (which providers advise so much to clients) and a contact person outside the team to mediate or respond to clients' requests not met by the team itself.

(2) *Process*. Excellent programs rely on clear and well-run support processes executed by colleagues often in the early phases in their careers. The collaboration between "faculty" and program coordinators is as crucial and the result of anything less than flawless teamwork is immediately visible in the delivery of the program. Since the platform members are involved in various different networks with different procedures, it requires an extra effort to get them to understand the administrative processes, focus attention on building a relationship with coordinators and adhering to these processes.

(3) *Purpose*. With distributed leadership, open boundaries and little management in place, all the emphasis in the platform is focused on creating great immediate outcomes for clients. As many of the professionals associated with the platform are paid on a *per diem* basis, it is a challenge to get people involved in the longer term continuity of the platform. Creating rituals, a brand and meaning beyond today's work is complicated by the fact that many are dispersed around the

globe. The moments of togetherness, celebration and loss are rarely shared by the whole community, while we know how powerful these are to build community. Can we really talk about community here? Are we entering new eras of virtual community building?

Conclusions

It has been our aim to describe an emerging model for delivering customized executive learning programs, which is gaining significance in the world of management development. The continuing proliferation of intermediaries that bring together free agents and clients to deliver customized executive learning programs will pose an increasing challenge to the dominance of the proprietary model of most top-tier graduate management schools. Especially, in these dire economic times, the platform model has the potential to compete with top-tier business schools and gain a wider foothold in the market for executive learning.

This article does not aim to suggest that either the institutional or platform model for executive learning is superior to the other. As the benefits of the one model almost immediately reflect the shortcomings of the other, there will be a place for both given the variety of client requests. Indeed, the two models can reinforce each other as many of professionals cross the boundaries of academic institutions and platforms regularly. Furthermore, the implications may reach beyond this specific field to all professional service firms where value is created through integrating professional services into customized solutions such as consultancy, accountancy, medical services and law firms. Further research would be required to see to what extent the model already exists in these other fields.

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Appendix 1. The dilemma for business schools

The primary task of a business school is to further academic management knowledge through rigorous research. Academic faculty spend the majority of their time doing this research with the aim to get the results published in academic journals and make their mark on how businesses can be best led, grown and competitive advantage can be created. Educating the world through teaching these research outcomes on degree programs and to management practitioners in executive education programs, is the secondary part of their mission. And, of course, customized executive education is a very important income contributor for many top-tier business schools, especially for the European business schools that do not have the huge endowment funds of their US counterparts.

Top-tier business schools typically draw from their internal faculty pool for the teaching of executive education programs, with the belief that academic faculty best understand the latest insights and are best placed to explain these insights to an executive audience. Indeed, one of the main differentiators communicated by top-tier business schools in the market for executive education for custom programs has been the leading edge research of their core faculty. Not surprisingly, most business schools are strict with regard to who can teach on executive education programs, with many top-tier institutions all but forbidding the use of external faculty and especially non-academics (i.e. non-PhD qualified consultants or practitioners), except as guest speakers or for "extra-curricular" sessions. There is a view that faculty from outside the school's boundaries might "dilute" the brand promise to customers, and ultimately undermine the brand of the business school itself. While executive education programs are often marketed and supervised by "administrative staff", the academic faculty at top-tier business schools typically guide the "intellectual" design of executive education programs. In our experience this approach can be limiting for a number of reasons: academic faculty are typically experts in a specific management discipline and therefore tend to frame client issues through their own field of interest; academic faculty can guard their content expertise and be reluctant to collaborate in sharing their material with other faculty on a program, making integrated design difficult; research-oriented academics tend to rely more traditional learning approaches such as lectures and case studies, and; formally trained academics can be dismissive of learning approaches that have not been academically validated, which can be rather limiting when integrating approaches from fields such as literature or the performing arts.

At most top-tier business schools research oriented tenure-track faculty have some degree of "free agent" status as a key part of their job contracts in the form of consulting days. It shows that business schools need to provide some contractual freedom in order to keep faculty "connected" to business. The consulting days symbolize how faculty are primarily connected to their field of research, rather than to the institution. It is a delicate balance and an ongoing source of debate: What kind of work is "allowed" within the scope of the consulting days? What work may be conflicting with the business school interest? Most business schools explicitly or implicitly forbid faculty from working on executive education programs for rival business schools, but few have policies in place relating to how faculty might work with the open collaboration networks discussed in this paper. Some business schools have taken the path of more open collaboration, with Duke University's off-shoot Duke CE probably the most widely recognized in this respect. But the vast majority of top-tier business schools still lean towards more proprietary approaches.

Appendix 2. Case study: How the platform model works in practice

After nine years of working with a business school from The Netherlands, ARCADIS NV realized it was time to change its Advanced Management Program (AMP) which was preparing high potentials for positions in the top 100. ARCADIS is a global engineering company in the areas of infrastructure, environment, and buildings with 13,500 people, with 11 operational companies and at home and at work in more than 70 countries. The program itself was well received by participants, the faculty involved had a good relationship with the board and yet the

program was not meeting expectations anymore. Too few of the people who had been on the program actually made the step into the top 100. The leadership component had too little impact as some of the delegates had clearly been able to navigate their way around important messages for their self-awareness and leadership. Generally the program was overly focused on academic content with too little emphasis on application and impact. The business school and faculty came primarily from The Netherlands, the same country as head office which was raising concern from the newly acquired international subsidiary companies. The company had become much more international over the last nine years with 26 acquisitions abroad. This needed to be reflected in the top 100 program. Some of the new strategic challenges are around innovation, open collaboration between operating companies leading to the development of global solutions for their global clients. Their partner for this program would need to at least understand and ideally role model this strategic reality.

The client decided to engage the director of an executive learning platform intermediary based in Rotterdam. His suggestion to the client was to schedule a design day as a real life assessment with a clear output: a new design for the AMP. The director of the platform intermediary reasoned that the company would be much better positioned to make an informed decision about a new way of collaborating with an executive learning partner after an intense real work experience together.

During the design day in The Netherlands the client and a team of learning professionals identified from the network of the platform intermediary focused on designing the new AMP outputs and the design of the first module. To demonstrate the global reach of the Intermediary's network, faculty from the USA, Germany, the UK and The Netherlands teleconferenced into the meeting.

After the meeting a design was developed in collaboration with the company's senior HR managers and then signed off by the board. A team led by a program director started to develop the program. All together a final team of seven faculty and facilitators was involved, from five different nationalities and four countries. Each of the faculty and facilitators prepared their own learning methods and materials, with the program director and client overseeing the whole program and ensuring that development work was well integrated. Most communication was done virtually. This collaboration also led to three customized assignments used as real life projects during the program.

The program was well received, and the projects led to ideas about the branding and positioning of a newly acquired US operating company, as well as ideas to integrate the environmental sustainability trend more practically in the firm's business offering.

Some of the challenges of the project were around creating an in depth understanding of the program flow by different faculty during the virtual development, but this understanding emerged quickly once the faculty were together and delivering the program.

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