

Supporting Itinerant Music Teachers Through Design Thinking

Lindsay M. Luft-Dixon

College of Education, Michigan State University

CEP 817: Teaching Technology Through Design

Professors William Bork and Bret Staudt Willet

April 26, 2020

Introduction

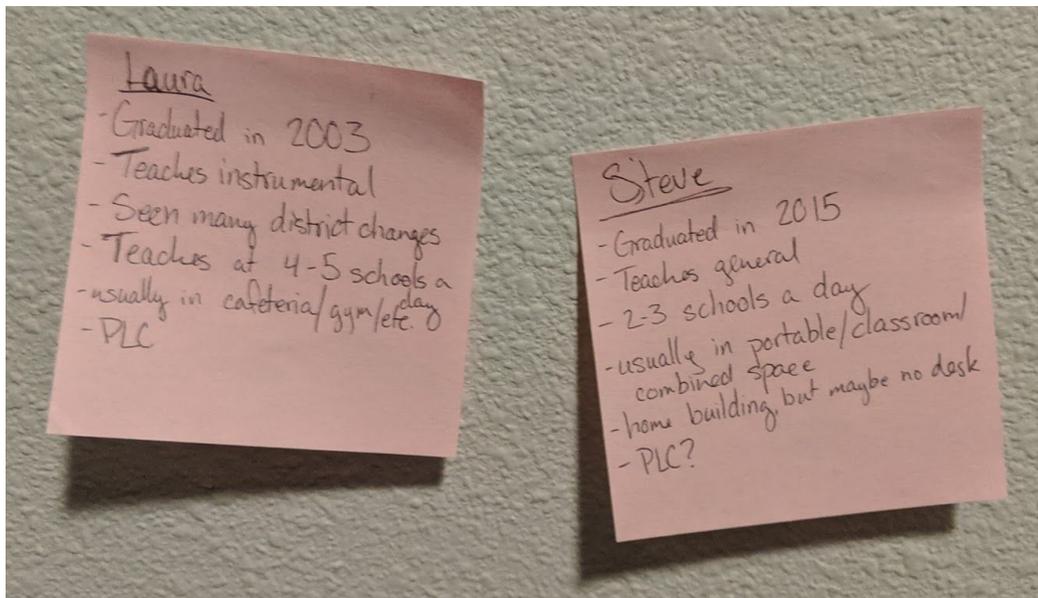
I accepted my first teaching job three years ago as an itinerant music teacher. Our district has gone through a lot of changes in staffing, funding, and schedules over that time. Itinerants teach at different buildings throughout the day, starting in one building, traveling during the work day, and ending at a different building. I spoke with a few of my colleagues about being itinerants at a biweekly meeting. Many of them spoke to me about feeling unsupported in their roles working at two to seven buildings a week with minimal supplies. Some teachers even spoke about not having instruments or space to dance with primary students. They feel they are often the last to find out about news because they do not always have mailboxes and are overloaded with the distribution list emails from each building.

I explored this situation using the [Stanford Design Model](#) which has five steps: empathize, define, ideate, prototype, and test (Plattner, 2018). Through the process, I learned how to create solutions using design thinking and developed a prototype to help my colleagues.

Empathize

Many of these were struggles I have also experienced as a fellow itinerant music teacher and I have wanted to change. As a peer and not an administrator, there are not many ways that I can have a large impact on our funding and scheduling. I would have to find ways to make the most impact that I could for others within my own role, but first I needed a better picture of the demographic I was trying to help. Although we share the same title, itinerant music teachers do not have any group meetings throughout the year so I do not know most of my peers in person.

Using our email distribution lists, I broke the teachers down into groups by experience, subject, location, and resources. Two distinct types appeared, and I created two character profiles based on these discoveries: Laura and Steve. “Laura” is an instrumental music teacher who has over a decade of teaching experience, and teaches at approximately four schools a day. “Steve” by comparison is new to teaching and teaches general music classes at two or three schools a day in wherever the school can find space to teach. You can find the full profiles below.



These helped me discover that the person that really needs help are those general music teachers who are new to teaching and being an itinerant. Being a first-year teacher is hard enough but learning how to be an itinerant at the same time is very difficult.

Define

Embarking on this design process, I first needed to settle on what problem could use a solution I could provide. The original statement read as follows:

“I am an itinerant music teacher, one of approximately 30 in my district. We travel between buildings during the school day, and end up teaching in very different rooms. I’ve taught in six schools over three years in: the primary general music room, carpeted cafeteria, tiled cafeteria, music portable, overload portable, and a loft space that was originally the teacher’s lounge. Some of these rooms do not have speakers, instruments, or smartboards. We are contractually given 45 minutes to pack up, drive, and set up at each new building (this year they cut us short).” (Luft-Dixon, 2020, p.7)

I originally believed that I should solve for how we could create engaging and useful lessons for students while dealing with the conditions that surround our positions. Working through various exercises to discover the smaller problems along the way helped me see how the overarching issue is that itinerant general music teachers feel unsupported. My perspective of the problem had shifted radically from my original definition after discovering the population that is truly underserved and needs the most help. My problem was redefined as “itinerant general music teachers are feeling unsupported in their transient positions.”

Ideate

Ideation is defined as “...the mode in which you generate radical design alternatives,” (Plattner, 2018, p.iii). In this case, it meant understanding why itinerant teachers felt unsupported. Due to COVID-19 isolation and school closures, I met with my siblings via Discord video chat to discuss the conditions my colleagues and I have experienced. My siblings include:

1. A 26 year old who works for Donor's Choose and is intimately familiar with the supply and support deficiencies for modern educators.
2. A 22 year old music education major who is exploring future job conditions.
3. A 14 year old freshman in high school familiar with a strong district music program.

We developed a fully fleshed out list that clarified a lot of the areas where itinerant music teachers might feel unsupported. After listing so many reasons they felt unsupported, my brothers and I struggled to find ways to truly make them feel supported within the constraints of my current position. The ideas for possible prototypes developed over the next few days as I did some [journaling about my problem](#) whenever a related idea came to mind.

Prototype

Eventually I settled on one idea that I knew I could implement: a handbook given to all general music itinerants that would provide specific information relevant to the position that they would otherwise assume they do not have or ask a colleague. At first I envisioned this as something given to them during new teacher orientation, but pivoted to a digital version so that it would not be a burden to keep with you while traveling. An important part of this was deciding how to organize the information. I started with a list of topics I felt necessary to include, then organized them into categories based on similar content.

Navigational	Building	Music Curr.	Itinerant	Miscellaneous
Title Page	Primary School	Curriculum	Your Schedule	List of Phone Numbers
Table of Contents	Building Requirements	Optional Items	Professional Development	Support Flow Chart
Index	Room Requirements	Frameworks	Mileage	E-mail Distributions
	Additional Buildings	GM in KSD	Guest Teacher	
	Provided by Building	Stipend	End-of-Year	
	End-of-Year	Provided Supplies	Schedule Changes	
	Evaluations	PLC	Your Role	

From there I was able to structure the table of contents, lay out basic information and what would be in every section and subsection for a basic prototype. The next important step was to share it with some colleagues to see if they would find it as valuable as I believed it would be.

Test

How I planned to test my prototype changed drastically with the onset of COVID-19. Originally the prototype would be brought to my professional learning community to be workshopped and discussed during our biweekly meeting. Instead I asked four of my colleagues to view and comment on [personal digital copies of my handbook](#). Unfortunately I was unclear in my directions when I should have been explicit and received varied levels of feedback. While I had done well to get varied levels of experience and population to test my prototype, I did not give enough incentive to follow through on participation or provide in-line feedback. Even with those setbacks, I received some important feedback from my testing:

- Teacher C said they would review but never did.
- Teacher E reviewed the handbook and replied “This looks GREAT! A perfectly

comprehensive overview of what an itinerant music teacher might expect when walking into a new position. Really, I can't think of anything I would add to or take away from your document." (S. Erak, personal communication, March 31, 2020) She may have had issues working with technology that was new to her.

- Teacher M provided comprehensive in-line feedback throughout the handbook, and shared "I edited based on a) ease of reading and b) questions/concerns I've heard from teachers I've worked with at [school]." (R. Martinicchio, personal communication, April 3, 2020)

In the future for testing, I would set clear expectations and provide an incentive so that all that volunteered would follow through with the proper testing procedures. Based on the limited feedback I did receive, I believe that my prototype would be successful.

Conclusion

[Stanford's Design Model](#) is incredibly helpful in finding possible solutions for explicitly defined problems. I believe that an itinerant general music handbook would help support new and experienced itinerant teachers based on the testing results. I plan to continue fleshing it out and developing the handbook to provide for next year's itinerants, and will be paid for my efforts through effective education hours. I also plan to update the handbook with a section on how itinerant teaching looks with distance learning.

References

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