



Collaboration through Technology to Earn TAPAC Accreditation

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Introduction and Background. For several years our program was an affiliate member of the Textile and Apparel Programs Accreditation Commission (TAPAC), and as faculty of an apparel program at a large, land-grant university, we entertained the idea of pursuing full accreditation. During one typical Friday afternoon faculty meeting, we were writing strategic planning objectives required by our university, and the topic of accreditation resurfaced. We thought, “If we can get through this, we can get through the accreditation process!” The idea of accreditation fit well with our program, our dean was supportive, and admissions felt strongly that gaining an international accreditation would enhance recruiting. In addition, we could use information from our university-required strategic planning to support the accreditation information. We said, “Let’s go for it!”

Once we made our decision, the department head granted the Accreditation Leader (AL) a course release. With the support of our department head, AL and a few faculty attended some of the TAPAC Webinars. With this training, we began our journey toward accreditation. To start the process, we met a few times in-person, shuffling hard copies of accreditation templates to navigate the application requirements, while accomplishing little. Then COVID came; we were forced to use new technologies for our collaboration. The change became a benefit. The purpose of this case study is to highlight our successful integration of technology and collaboration to attain accreditation within a professional context.

Conducting the Self-Study. Because the university was operating online only, we were forced to collaborate through technology. For our next meetings, we used Zoom with a pre-notice through email with the typical handouts attached. Again, more paper. We don’t recommend “handouts.” Someone always forgot to print theirs, couldn’t find the right email during the meeting, or forgot to review the handouts altogether. After several more meetings that completely frustrated AL, she turned to more technology for a solution. She set up Zoom meetings for us and shared her screen while explaining the accrediting body’s Meta-Goals and other parts of the accreditation process. By showing us what was on her computer screen, we could all view the same document without trying to locate specific pages in our print-outs (that, again, some of us did not have on hand). As they say, for the first time ever, we were on the

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same page! And as an added benefit for the environment, by going digital, we eliminated paper waste.

After a few introductory meetings, we began to understand fully the size of the project and the need for increased collaboration. With Zoom and screen sharing, collaboration came naturally. As AL pointed out topics covered by the charts, she admitted that many of these topics were not her area of expertise. For example, it was easy for us to see that topic Y was about culture and that it fit with a course taught by our Cultural Person (CP). CP discussed what she did in her class and explained what objectives would fit. With that first breakthrough, we moved to another level of technology. AL not only shared her computer screen with us but allowed us to have access so CP could write what she was explaining. Technology and collaboration were working for us that day, and slowly, the rest of us began to contribute.

After the “break-through” meeting, AL posted a file with the tables in Google Docs and invited each of us to fill in objectives that fit our classes. Embrett et al. (2021) noted, as did we, that tools in Google Suite are supportive of collaboration. After several weeks of individual time with Google Docs, we met again and examined what was missing. We shared ideas and again typed on AL’s shared screen as we discussed the Meta-Goals for that meeting. The collaboration not only filled our charts but also filled our thoughts. Each of us learned more about what the other was teaching, which helped us develop a laddering diagram to show how our courses built on previous courses. Laddering, or educational scaffolding, is building the foundation of a topic in one course and having the subsequent course created so that students actually use that foundation content (Doo, 2020). Technology helped us create graphics that explained our ladders better than words. For people teaching upper-level courses, this was helpful not only for completing the TAPAC paperwork but also for being better informed about what students know from the prerequisites.

Preparing the Documentation. Once we completed the tables, we needed to (a) gather evidence from our courses to support the Meta-Goals and (b) develop the submission document. To gather the evidence, AL created more folders in Google Cloud. Each one of us could easily load examples of students’ work and could view the content of other folders. This kept us organized, and viewing work from other classes was helpful when we were unsure what to post. We shared even when we did not realize we were sharing.

For the submission document, AL shared a new document in Google Docs. She set up an outline and provided links to the tables and files. The technology was easy to use and kept us from being overwhelmed with paperwork and kept the current version in front of each of us. Previously,

when we shared documents by email attachment, someone would always work on the wrong version, but Google Docs kept the most recent copy in the top view. Previous research also mentions this benefit of Google Docs (Mansor, 2012). In addition, AL highlighted sections that each of us needed to complete and sent us email notices that linked us directly to our sections in the Google Doc. Together we completed the required parts in a collaborative effort that was certainly greater than the sum of each of our efforts.

In many places, we used “suggesting” instead of “editing” so that everyone could see what had been changed. We used “comments” in the document when we needed to explain things. These technology tools were also helpful when doing final edits. Each of us had access to the document to post messages, ask questions and gain clarification. We found it was much easier for someone to explain their own courses than to have one of us guess at the right wording. Collaboration was the key to getting accurate information with limited corrections. And, technology, through the availability of information on the department and university website, also helped AL gather institutional data without endless trips to some dusty records office and eliminated time lags in waiting for someone else to gather the information.

Conclusions. Drawing from the case study, this abstract describes strategies for overcoming barriers to collaboration and sustaining a culture of continuous improvement throughout the accreditation journey. First, we highly recommend the instructional help that TAPAC and ITAA provide, and we support having multiple faculty attend. Second, we recommend the use of Zoom with screen sharing for meetings. Even after the university went back to the classroom, we did not give up our Zoom meetings. Zoom was so much easier for each of us to see the screen and add our ideas. Although apart, we found collaboration easier. During the years we worked on accreditation, several faculty were on leave or working remotely, and Zoom was the answer. Finally, as we realized the benefits of technology sharing, and collaboration available through Google Docs and the Cloud, we began to use it for other collaborative writing projects.

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