

# **Boost Your Efficiency with Agile in Online and Distance Education**

**Laurie Gyalog**  
**NC State University**

**Katie Bean**  
**NC State University**

*Agile has arrived, but the higher education sector has yet to realize its value. The time is now for higher education to adjust operational practices to respond to change and evolving customer needs. In adopting Agile and customizing the approach for our unique working environment, we have been able to promote organizational effectiveness by clear prioritization, shared purpose, organizational alignment and synchronization. Adopting an Agile mindset and introducing easy frameworks to enhance workflow contributed to an increase of efficiency and effectiveness. An opportunity lies ahead for Agile to scale across higher education and NC State University is leading the charge.*

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## **INTRODUCTION**

The higher education environment is changing at a rapid pace. In order to stay viable in a dynamic changing marketplace, we must rethink our operational practices. Agile project management is a platform for us to accelerate change and process improvement, allowing us to be more adaptable, flexible, responsive and relevant. Big business has realized the value of Agile, but higher education has yet to catch up. What we have ahead of us is an opportunity. At NC State University, we have leveraged Agile to bring courses online faster and produce marketing collateral with less revisions all while increasing team morale and collaboration. These are two areas among many within our Distance Education and Learning Technologies Application (DELTA) department that have realized the benefits of Agile.

## **AGILE**

What is Agile? Agile is a mindset, a culture, a way of approaching the way we work. Agile is guided by four values and twelve principles. The values promote placing emphasis on individuals and interactions, working products, customer collaboration and responding to change. These guiding values and principles support the way teams work together, how and what they produce. Built from a software environment, the philosophy now extends to all aspects of the workplace and its culture. Agile is not a one-size fits all solution for projects and teamwork, instead it is a collection of values, principles, frameworks and practices to challenge our normal work habits and interactions. Adopting Agile welcomes many benefits such as the ability to manage changing priorities, project visibility, alignment, accelerated decision making and speed to market, as noted in the *13th Annual State Of Agile Report*.

NC State University, a higher-education institution, promoting a campus of innovation, organizational efficiency, outreach and impact, is the perfect environment to introduce, embrace and propel Agile. In 2015, we exposed our marketing and communications team to Agile. Driven by a need to increase visibility, heighten team morale, improve customer interactions, deliver more timely and improve communications - we adopted Kanban. Embracing a mindset of “let’s try this for a couple of weeks and see if it works,” we decided to critically think about how to visually represent our workflow. Five years later, we run 150 projects across the board annually, with nine permanent contributors and several part-time employees.

## **Kanban**

What is Kanban? Kanban is a framework that focuses on flow, helping to visualize work, while limiting work-in-progress to focus on finishing. Kanban is lightweight, low-cost, easy to manage and requires minimal training and onboarding. In its simplest form it is a whiteboard that defines, ‘to-do’, ‘doing’ and ‘done’. Kanban is highly flexible and customizable, which is why it was the perfect fit for our team and workflow. The marketing and communications team tracks work on vibrant post-its, sized in similar work size increments across a workflow traveling from: ‘proposed’ to ‘vetting’ to ‘ready’ to ‘active’ to ‘reviewing’ to ‘done’. We visualize all of the team’s work, dependencies and hand-offs. Simple post-its, sharpies, and a whiteboard have allowed us to bring transparency to the work we are doing and enable a common shared mission among the team. Weekly, we meet for 15 minutes to discuss what we have completed the week prior, what we plan to focus on finishing this week, and what impediments we need help resolving to complete our work. Team members and decision makers all attend this meeting.

Visualizing our work allows us to understand resource allocation and prioritization to inform decision making. Output, velocity, communication and morale have increased as well as the team rapport. Kanban allows us to see incremental results on a regular cadence from a collective perspective with decision makers alongside us. We celebrate our successes with each post-it moving to done and have reduced the overhead of frequent status update meetings to understand project progress.

## **Retrospectives and Reviews**

While Kanban is a very visible example of Agile in practice, we understand the importance and value of working from the bottom-up, top-down and side concurrently. Over the years, we have been training our colleagues on the Agile mindset, values and principles and challenging teams to think about how they may apply to their work and organizational contributions. Our team of project managers gently introduce small Agile practices, as appropriate, along project cycles.

Retrospectives and Reviews are two of our most successful ceremony additions at scale. Promoting regular customer collaboration, inspection and adaptation, we facilitate frequent ceremonies to stop and review what was produced. In this ceremony, we welcome customers, stakeholders and team members to demo what has been completed to date to see if it satisfies the requirements and delivers on intended value. In holding regular reviews, on a predictable cadence, we become more nimble and able to pivot, responding to change early and often. A separate ceremony, following the completion of a review, is the retrospective. Here the team meets in a safe environment to speak on how the work is being done. Open, kind, and candid feedback allows the team to grow and build trust and safety. Lessons learned about how we work together along the development cycle, enables the ability to shift the working dynamic. These practices are easy to introduce, but deliver a big impact to the way we work.

## **Minimal Viable Product**

In supporting a productive work review ceremony, we had to shift the way we thought about project planning. Changing from a traditional phase-gate development plan to an incremental development approach and by introducing a minimal viable product development technique. We challenged our course development, new media, video production and educational technology teams to think about how we can break work down to produce something working and valuable early and often. In doing so, we can

welcome feedback and collaborate with our customers frequently throughout the development cycle. Releasing a minimal viable product first and building responsibly each step forward, reduces risk and maximizes business value.

## CONCLUSION

As we continue along our Agile journey at NC State DELTA, we have engaged top leadership to rally around a shared set of Agile adoption goals. These goals, in support of our university goal of organizational excellence, will propel us in scaling responsibly and productively. In starting with the basics, clarity and common language, small wins and meeting people where they were, fueled by education and experiential learning and highly-visible and successful practices, we have increased our maturity and synced our performance top down, bottom up and sideways. We strive for dynamic work with precise timing; cadence, synchronization and alignment. Most importantly, we placed an emphasis on trust and psychological safety, across teams and the organization. We promote an Agile environment which allows teams to fail fast, learn fast, and feel supported. In following this model, customizing it for your teams and organization, you can bring Agile to your higher education institution. What we have ahead of us is an opportunity to increase our response to change, to be Agile.

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