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Rapid and creative course design: as easy as ABC?

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Abstract

How do we best help our time-pressured academics design rich blended and online courses? To address this challenge, University College London has developed ABC, an effective and engaging hands-on workshop that has now been trialled with great success over a range of programmes. In just 90 minutes using a game format teams are able to work together to create a visual 'storyboard' outlining the type and sequence of learning activities (both online and offline) required to meet the module's learning outcomes. ABC is particularly useful for new programmes or those changing to an online or more blended format. We are currently expanding the initiative and developing a set of online support resources.

Keywords: curriculum design; blended learning; distance learning; faculty development; educational strategies

1. Introduction

Enhancing conventional face-to-face approaches to teaching in colleges and universities towards more blended, online and distance learning formats is recognized as a dauntingly challenging task for academics and learning technologists alike (e.g. Beetham & Sharpe, 2007; Ellis & Goodyear, 2009). Classroom and online environments are both equally complex, subtle and hard to define, so transferring from one mode into the other is fraught with pitfalls, especially for faculty with little experience of online course formats.

University College London (UCL) is a renowned research focused and multidisciplinary university with over 38,000 students and 6000 academic and research staff. One of its key strategic aims is to be a global leader in the integration of research and education, underpinning an inspirational student experience (UCL, 2015). These ambitions to enhance curriculum quality are represented especially by the Connected Curriculum initiative (Fung,

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2014) and are reinforced by the use of data from external benchmarks such as the UK National Student Survey (HEFCE, 2016). Top down interventions are augmented by widespread grassroots interest and activity in blended learning and technology enhanced flexible modes of study.

UCL's Digital Education team, together with our Centre for Advancing Learning and Teaching, work closely with faculty to provide on-demand contextualized support to review and develop new curricula. However we recognized Beetham's (2012) general critique of curriculum design in higher education in that "practice and process had often been local, ad hoc, unexamined, and unresponsive to changing demands". As Nicol (2012) also acknowledged "Curriculum design in higher education is not a formal activity and there is little support, formal or informal, provided in most higher education institutions to help academics become better at designing learning activities, modules and courses". However Beetham had cautioned "although change was seen as necessary, it was difficult to bring about in complex and devolved institutions".

We therefore began to look for a lightweight, streamlined process that would result in well-designed courses, aligned to institutional mandates but also based on sound educational principles. We realized that time was the critical factor for large-scale faculty engagement. While 'away-day' intensive formats such as Carpe Diem (Salmon and Wright, 2014) were known to be effective we felt it was unrealistic to expect faculty and support teams, at least initially, to commit more than a few hours to the design process. For a process to be adopted at UCL it would have to show time efficiency for curriculum teams and other stakeholders.

Providentially UK higher education has extensively researched in just this area. Over four years the JISC Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design Programme (JISC 2012) evaluated a range of institutional change methods. It was noted that "particularly successful were face-to-face workshops where curriculum teams could work intensively on a module or programme of study, developing graphical representations of the curriculum such as timelines and storyboards" (Beetham, 2012).

The University of Ulster's Viewpoints (University of Ulster, 2012) project met our criteria. Their curriculum design team had pioneered a storyboarding approach, using a course 'canvas' along with sets of cards that could be selected, sequenced, annotated, and used as discussion prompts in the outline design of a course 'timeline'. Viewpoints had developed a number of card sets based on for example principles from the Re-Engineering Assessment Practices (REAP) project (REAP, 2010) and the SCONUL Seven Pillars of Information Literacy model (SCONUL 1999; Goldstein, 2015). Nicol (2012) had thoroughly evaluated the project and found it had encouraged reflection and creativity, helping "identify solutions to curriculum design challenges and to maintain an educational rather than a content focus, a learning rather than a teaching focus".

2. UCL's ABC method

The ABC curriculum design method (Perovic and Young, 2015) built on the Viewpoints principles and was developed in 2014 as a ninety-minute hands-on rapid-development workshop for UCL module and programme teams. The name itself has a significance as it references Arena, UCL's popular faculty development programme, blended learning and the Connected Curriculum, mentioned above as UCL's major strategic educational initiative. The Connected Curriculum itself is represented with six dimensions of learning though research and enquiry and is usually articulated as a series of student activities that "close the divide between teaching and research" (Arthur, 2014) and "integrate research into every stage of an undergraduate degree, moving from research-led to research-based teaching". To align with the Connected Curriculum and its foundation of activity-based learning a new card-set was developed based on Diana Laurillard's (2012) notion of six 'learning types', derived from her theory-based Conversational Framework. The six learning types are acquisition (or read/watch/listen), inquiry, practice, production, discussion and collaboration, and these types form the ABC six-card set.

In addition new workshop documentation was created and the Viewpoints workshop sequence adapted. At least two or three members of the team involved in the programme or module development attend a workshop (Fig. 1.). It is required that they bring the module specifications (or programme overview) with learning outcomes to the workshop.