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e-Learning Course Design Intensives: disrupting the norms of curriculum design

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At one level, this paper is about a type of intervention to support e-learning, the Course Design Intensives (CDIs) at Oxford Brookes University. It might also be read at another level, as a recommendation to transform 'business as usual' in the curriculum design process in our institutions. The paper focuses on drawing out some lessons from five years of implementing and evaluating CDIs at Oxford Brookes University, relates the CDIs to similar interventions in two other UK universities, and discusses the 'transferability' of the format.

Introduction

We seem to be caught in a conundrum. In a relatively short time the institutional Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) has proliferated and become mission critical in UK Higher Education (Jenkins, Brown et al. 2005). Now, a new wave of excitement about the transformative potential of technology accompanies the rise of Web 2.0 – blogs, wikis, social networks, social bookmarks. Yet so far the potential of e-learning to foster innovation in pedagogy has not been realised (Hedberg 2006).

On the plus side, there is evidence that macro-level interventions can make a difference. The Pew Grant programme in course redesign in the USA showed that systematic, institution-level course redesign activities can generate real benefits in how technology is used in higher education. Twigg (2005) cites enhanced quality of learning, improved retention, diversifying access to higher education learning opportunities, increasing capacity (student numbers) and reducing costs in US universities and colleges as results of the Pew Grant programme. In the UK the Higher Education Funding Council for England-funded e-learning Benchmarking and Pathfinder programme (see http://www.heacademy.ac.uk/ourwork/learning/elearning/pathfinder) is a similar, macro-level intervention. Differences in the penetration of e-learning in the US and UK mean that Pathfinder 'aimed at building the capacity to produce the kind of proposals that Pew Grant funded' (Mayes and Morrison 2008, p 8). This programme has just drawn to a close and it will likely be some time before the impacts of the exercise become clear.

What is clear is that in thinking about mainstreaming e-learning many Pathfinder institutions were thinking hard about course redesign. 'Most of the Pathfinder pilot projects can be regarded as in some sense raising awareness of e-learning in the course design process' and fully one third of them 'trialled new methods for working directly with course teams across the institution' (Mayes and Morrison 2008, p 11).

This suggests that an approach that can help to unlock the paradox of widespread use of technology and low levels of transformative pedagogy is to transform *how* we do curriculum development. 'Course design is complicated, and often remains a private, tacit process' say Sharpe and Oliver (2007, p 43). Yet the literature is replete with recommendations for multi-professional course team approaches to e-learning development (see, for example, Laurillard 1993; American Productivity and Quality Centre 1999; Calvert 2001). More than ten years ago an evaluation of the Teaching and Learning Technology Programme (TLTP) noted that expanded, multi-professional design teams could be associated with success in e-learning development (HEFCE 1996).

This echoes with a recent review of UK undergraduate blended e-learning which identified course redesign as a key success factor for blended e-learning. The report (Sharpe, Benfield et al. 2006b, p 4) noted that

the valuable features of course redesign were identified as: undertaking an analysis of the current course, collecting and making use of student feedback, undertaking the design as a team, designs which make explicit their underlying principles, and developing the course iteratively over a number of years.

The Oxford Brookes University CDIs are an example of a meso-level intervention that aims to disrupt the 'norms' of privacy and tacitness associated with curriculum design, making the process more public, explicit, and team-based. The CDIs do not address how to mainstream e-learning. That requires other levers, like institutional learning, teaching and assessment strategies. CDIs are for course teams who have *already decided* to design e-learning into their courses. They are about changing business as usual in the process of course design and they aim to facilitate the creation of transformative designs.

Evaluating three team-based course design intervention formats

We have been evaluating and modifying our CDIs since their inception in 2003. In that time almost 140 staff from around 30 course teams in three institutions have participated in CDIs. Our evaluation data includes regular end of event surveys of participants and short, informal group interviews of selected participants in some events. An interview-based evaluation of the impact of the CDIs on past participants' e-learning design behaviours and their teams' e-learning developments is on-going and should be completed by the end of autumn 2008.

In 2008 the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD) was a partner in two HEA-funded Pathfinder continuation projects, enabling us to experience and to some extent evaluate the principles and methods used in three team-based course design workshop formats. The Cheetah project involved delivery of the University of Leicester's Carpe Diem format (see Armellini and Jones 2008), developed by Gilly Salmon, at six Pathfinder institutions. Cheetah included reciprocal delivery of Carpe Diem and CDIs at Brookes and Leicester respectively, enabling both sides to experience and evaluate each other's workshop format.

The CABLE Transfer project involved the delivery of the University of Hertfordshire's CABLE process, a format based on the Higher Education Academy's (HEA) Change Academy model (see Anderson, Bullen et al. 2008) to four Pathfinder institutions. OCSLD is the external evaluator of CABLE Transfer, investigating 'institutional readiness' factors for CABLE and its impact on the departments engaged with it.

Finally, during academic year 2007-8 OCSLD worked on a CDI transfer project with the University of Brighton as part of their Pathfinder project. OCSLD consultants worked closely with Brighton's Centre for Learning and Teaching (CLT) and Learning Technology Group (LTG) on the project. We co-delivered three sets of CDIs for over a dozen course teams at Brighton, aiming to gradually shift 'ownership' of the format to Brighton. Over the course of these events we handed over all the workshop materials and Brighton personnel eventually took over facilitating their own events.

Team-based course design

A briefing paper (see Benfield 2008 at
http://elearning.heacademy.ac.uk/weblogs/pathfinder/wp-content/uploads/2008/02/OxfordBrookesPathfinderBriefings.zip) explains in more detail than is possible here how the CDIs work. A wiki site (see
https://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/CDIs/Home) shows examples of the structure of events, materials used in them and the outputs that teams produce.

The original idea for the Brookes CDI format is unashamedly borrowed from Gilly Salmon's Carpe Diem and so the two formats strongly resemble each other. The CDIs came about and were nurtured by an institutional e-learning strategy (see Sharpe, Benfield et al. 2006a). Essentially the format involves bringing several course teams together in one place for two days. The teams are expanded, multi-professional teams that include the academic teaching

staff, educational developers, learning technologists, subject librarians and where possible course administrators. On the first day teams work largely without computers, reviewing their primary objectives, making explicit their reasons for adopting e-learning and mapping out a top level 'blueprint' of the programme. This is very similar to day one of the Carpe Diem workshop.

However, unlike Carpe Diem which involves just one team, the Brookes CDIs usually involve multiple course teams from a variety of disciplines. Partly because of this multi-disciplinarity, the CDIs tend to offer more input than Carpe Diems. We present a range of examples of e-learning applications, design models, and techniques, aiming to inspire participants with at least some of these and challenging them to think afresh about how their course might run. The notion of *challenge*, in a supportive, collegial environment, underpins the whole CDI process.

On the second CDI day, like Carpe Diem the design work includes building one or more e-learning activities in their chosen technology/software environment. Participants work in their teams for much of the time. However, where Carpe Diems bring in a 'critical friend' on day 2 to review and feedback on designs, the CDIs involve more frequent peer review on both days. Each team acts as critical friends to other teams. A common feature of all three formats is making designs/plans *explicit* and sharing them with colleagues for review.

Our sense of the CABLE approach is that it has many similarities with these two formats, but tends to focus in more depth on team building and longer-term planning for change at departmental level. Like CDI and Carpe Diem, CABLE involves a two-day main workshop event, but unlike its cousins the CABLE one is residential. Like Carpe Diem and the CDIs it involves a pre-workshop planning process and post-event follow-up and support, although the specific nature of these varies across the three formats.

An important difference between CABLE and its cousins is that CABLE seems to have formalised student involvement. Both CDI and Carpe Diem facilitators are keen to normalise student involvement in the design process as well. Experience has shown that when students are involved they generate rich insights into the appropriateness of designs.

What have we learned?

A resounding refrain of our evaluations is, as one participant put it, that these events provide a 'fantastic opportunity to have 3 days! (unheard of) to work with like-minded colleagues'. As another participant put it, the CDI gave them 'time to think, plan and explore in greater depth'. All three events described here – CDIs, Carpe Diems, CABLE – deliver on this benefit and are effective at changing 'business as usual' in course design.

Beyond these essential elements – working in extended teams, intensively for at least two days, aiming to produce real outputs – it is not clear that any particular aspects of the workshop formats need be invariant when they are transferred to other institutions. At Brookes we have been adaptable, promiscuous even, with the CDI format, adjusting it to suit special requests or requirements by course teams. We have been asked to run a CDI for just one team, to extend the format to three days or compress it to one, and we have never said 'no'. Our first priority as developers is to make connections with course teams so that we can support them in the longer term. Our impression is that our Leicester colleagues are less likely to adapt the Carpe Diem format, although materials and activities from it may well be used in other development activities that are adapted to specific teams or individuals.

We have seen considerable success in transferring all three formats from their parent institutions to others. It is too early to elaborate specific institutional readiness factors – reports will be published in due course – but it is clear that whichever format is adopted, a 'fit' needs to be found with the institutional context, especially internal organisational structures, learning and teaching and e-learning strategies, and in particular with the specific institution's key e-learning support people and the technologies they use. A good part of our University of Brighton colleagues' successful adaptation of the CDIs appears to have

involved refining tactics for identifying suitable candidate teams and adapting their facilitation methods to match where those teams are at in their e-learning journeys.

We have found that the CDIs – and Carpe Diems and CABLE in their host institutions – are an important plank within a portfolio of available e-learning development activities for institutions moving into large scale e-learning redesign work. The presence of CDIs within our portfolio of staff development activities allows us to capitalise on serendipitous connections with teams or individuals seeking new ways to address educational issues or problems.

The CDIs are not a self-contained package; they are more the beginning of a process. The model explicitly involves the promise of follow-up support to course teams for the longer term, with expectations of regular consultation and feedback indefinitely. Our evaluation project is showing that this perception is usually shared by CDI participants. The aim is to build trust between developers and academic and support staff and to support the model of longer-term, iterative improvements to course designs mentioned above.

CDI-like processes may provide quick wins – an early Brookes CDI participant team succeeded in virtually overnight (well, six months anyway!) moving their whole academic school from low levels of e-learning to almost every undergraduate student being engaged in interactive e-learning. Nevertheless, the real benefits accrue when the institutional commitment to CDI-like interventions is long-term. With the best will in the world, course teams might be prevented from meeting their objectives by events beyond their control, like sudden losses of staff, funding or markets for courses. For example, a Brookes programme team participated in two CDIs, *four years apart,* before they brought their new, online MA to fruition.

A real advantage of the Brookes CDIs has been that involving educational developers at a very early stage of course design/redesign tends to facilitate evaluation being built into the design. In some cases this means curriculum teams engage developers as external evaluators of the course. As we have noted elsewhere (Sharpe, Benfield et al. 2006b), the more impressive examples of e-learning designs, those that are sustainable and make real impact on the student experience, tend to involve several years of iterative development drawing heavily on student feedback.

In conclusion, expanded, multi-professional, team-based course design is not 'business as usual'. The approach needs institutional commitment. A problem that CDI-like formats face is making it possible for multi-professional course teams to find two or more days to come together. Moving to team-based curriculum development requires explicit institutional resourcing, not because it is expensive of resources – it isn't necessarily and may offer efficiency gains – but because current institutional processes rarely acknowledge, facilitate or accept this way of working.

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