

Understanding the potential of learning design to support university teachers' design processes

Sue Bennett, Shirley Agostinho, Lori Lockyer, Rob Koper & Barry Harper

The 'learning design' concept encompasses a range of approaches that seek to represent teaching and learning experiences in a standardised way to allow designs to be disseminated to others. Although these approaches share some common underlying assumptions, they are motivated by quite different aims. Some aim to standardise instructional design specifications in the form of a design language or notation. Others seek to develop standardised procedures that enable designs to be more accurately translated into code by programmers. A further distinct strand of learning design research is investigating means by which teachers can document and communicate their designs to support teaching practice. Reusability is an essential characteristic of this approach, requiring that a learning design be both understandable and adaptable. Thus rather than the design being an exact reproduction, emphasis is placed on retention of the underlying design principles.

Although designing learning experiences is part of everyday teaching practice, the work of the teacher as designer is poorly understood and under-researched. For this reason teachers are often considered 'non-expert' designers, because they lack the professional design training many instructional designers receive. Rather than diminish the work of teachers, this distinction recognises the particular requirements of a learning design approach that caters for the needs of this group. However, these needs have rarely been explicated, giving rise to confusion about the learning design approach.

In this paper the authors clarify the notion of the learning design as a potential approach to supporting teaching practice. They present the conceptual basis for the learning design approach currently being explored in a major Australian research study and present a simple but systematic approach to describe teaching and learning experiences using a formalism that is readily understood by university teachers. The complementary relationship between this formalism and international standards, such as IMS-LD, is also explained.