

“Designing an Effective e-Learning Course: Experiences from an Open Polytechnic of New Zealand Course of 2013”

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ABSTRACT

It is natural to assume that that e-learning is about the loneliness of the long-distance learner, who sits alone at a keyboard, working his or her way through readings, exercises and tests, and lacking in interaction. Tackling this misconception lies in an insight on effective e-learning design. Design is too often overlooked by course developers, or otherwise misunderstood – some e-learning designers think that as long as their course "looks good," the visuals are sufficient. This study, therefore, highlights design issues in e-learning with particular insight from experiences from Open Polytechnic of New Zealand course (5097: Instructional Design for e-Learning). It is hoped that this insight will stimulate better understanding of design issues in e-learning.

Keywords: e-Learning, Loneliness, Design, Experience etc.

INTRODUCTION

Institutions, industries, and government agencies have an ever increasing need for professional, appropriate, timely and cost effective training. As a result of this very important need, training designers have the challenging task of designing effective e-learning to meet these needs. Designing a successful e-Learning course is seen as part art and part science (Allen, 2007). It involves the appropriate utilization of learning and training theory, a good understanding of the electronic designs tools and equipment, coupled with an appropriate understanding of the knowledge and/or skills to be taught. It also requires a blend of color, style, sound and video usage in a manner that educates while entertaining the student without distracting the learning experience (Steen, 2008). There is however no one-size-fits-all approach to the design of e-learning because each organization and course design has its own unique objectives, outcome, learning experiences, cultural and technological challenges. In spite of these differences, it is generally agreed that an effective e-learning and its design should be clear, interactive, friendly, collaborative, with effective guideline and motivating feedback.

Looking at the experiences and realities of the learner, it is sometimes assumed that e-learning is about the loneliness of the long-distance learner, who sits alone at a keyboard, working his or her way through readings, exercises and tests, and lacking in interaction. This is erroneous because with an effective design, e-learning experience could be quite as interactive and collaborative. Design is too often overlooked by course developers, or otherwise misunderstood – some e-learning designers think that as long as their course "looks good" effective learning and teaching can take place. This oversight could triggered facilitating challenges and poor learning experience. In line with the foregoing, this paper seeks to highlight design issues in e-learning with particular insight from experiences from Open Polytechnic of New Zealand course (5097: Instructional Design for e-Learning). Guiding questions are: What are the overall and specific objectives of the OPNZ course? (5097: Instructional Design for e-Learning)? What is the structure of the course? What were the learning activities and experiences provided by the course and how has it transformed and empowered learners?

Objective of the course (5097: Instructional Design for e-Learning)

The course 5097 – Instructional design for e-learning was the third in a programme of three courses making up certificate in designing and facilitating e-learning. The previous ones were 5095 (Transforming Learning Experiences) and 5096 (Facilitating Online Experiences). The aim of the course was to introduce learners to good practice in online course design as well as provide avenues for exploring and experiencing ways of designing effective and engaging learning activities for online courses. The course also offered opportunities for learners to design their own courses while being exposed to theories and good practice design examples. Some problem-based activities were provided for authentic and real-life scenarios and these were in form of teamwork exercises.

Structure of the Course

The course comprised seven modules. Module 1 focused on the vision of the kind of course learners would like to design – learner-centered, engaging, and inspiring. It further explored areas that are typically neglected in e-learning design and how best to ensure that e-learning courses do not fall into the 'content trap'. Module 2 explored how and why a 'context' could be a great starting point for online course design. Thus by bringing a context in a particular course design, learners are expected to gain hands-on experience of what an authentic learning environment looks like. Module 3 gave background information on what it takes to design engaging online activities and how to get the learners hooked. In addition, it looked at how to utilize quiz as a valuable learning experience. Module 4 explored issues of facilitation strategies and workload. Module 5 focused at designing assessment for online courses and also at innovative tools for online assessment. Module 6 explored how facilitators can offer enhanced learner's support through the use of language and learner-friendly navigations.. In addition, it explored how to 'hook' the learner by factoring emotion into online course design. Module 7 focused on online course evaluation (OPNz, 2013a).

Learning Activities and Experiences of the Course

a) "What are we designing?"

This was the introductory question. Anderson (2008) posits that when we design e-learning, our original experiences and approaches may be challenged. To achieve a vision of good e-learning design, there is need to move into a 'learner-centered' mode of thinking. Also in a reading text provided on the course page, "the creative process of course design" it was observed that being 'creative' does not mean being expensive, but rather the art of being extra creative in designing well with the use of few resources. Thus the creativity is in making the learning experience engaging, rather than focusing on adding 'bells' and 'whistles' (OPNz, 2013b). Thus the basic questions here should be:








- Who are the learners? (gathering information)
- Where and how can learners apply knowledge (thinking through themes and contexts)
- What does the learner need to be able to do? (creating meaningful learning activities)
- How will learners need to know they have achieved the learning objectives? (creating assessment activities)
- Which tool will support the learning activity? (making decision about appropriate tools and medias)
- How do we know that the learning design worked (course evaluation)

With the aid of a Moodle tool box, a step by step guideline and tool on how to design individual course, learners were instructed to develop the introductory part of their online courses. Course members were further 'set up' with a 'sandpit' course page with facilitator's access so that each could edit on the course

page. Initial instructions were to identify title of the course, course aim and objective, assessment instructions and technical requirement. Table 1 presents an example:

Table 1: Designing Online Course: Introductory Module

Course Title: Communication Learning through E-learning.

-  [Description of the course and durationPage](#)
-  [Are you ready?Page](#)
-  [What you will learn through this coursePage](#)
-  [How will you learnPage](#)
-  [How will be AssessedPage](#)
-  [What do you need to get startedPage](#)
-  [When you're not sureForum](#)

Here, labels are logically arranged for easy access by learners.

b) “Creating Context and Bringing Real Life to the Course Design”

Context is the process of situating the course, and more importantly the learners, within a ‘real-life’ story. Thus, by immersing learners into a context, they could associate what they need to do with a ‘real-life’ purpose. Indeed, Oliver (2000) proposes choosing meaningful contexts for the learning so that ‘the information contained therein becomes purposeful. When starting with scenarios or context, the course designer and content expert need to consider the impact of this approach on the structure of the course, so rather than traditional ‘topics’ of the course being driven by content section, the topics could be incidence happening in a story. The environment could be built around a series of task and structured in such a way that learners are lead to develop and provide solutions to the scenario. An example is presented in Table 2:

Table 2: Course Context: Putting the course into a context

Course Title: Communication Learning through E-learning.

Context

Ferdous is a project manager at Digital Media Solutions, an electronics design firm specializing in developing low-cost, high-value consumer products. Ferdous has a ten-year track record developing the hardware components for conventional television sets.....Ferdous must thus solve an interrelated set of design problems. Producing a quality product at a competitive price is an essential issue. From a technical perspective, Ferdous and his design team need to learn how the functions that are embedded within the LCD devices (and the associated electronic controllers) actually work. What advice do you have for Ferdous?

c) Designing Online Quiz and Crafting Good Feedback

For individual task 3, we were asked to design an online quiz for our courses. We understood that the value is in giving meaningful feedback (eLearning guild, 2005). Though feedback process is automated and standardized for all learners in a quiz, however, the facilitator still needs to carefully craft the feedback in order for it to be encouraging, specific and constructive. Course mate were thus instructed to:

- Make sure that they provide good feedback for every response in the quiz
- Have someone check all questions and all the possible responses
- Never de-mean or criticize the learner in any way
- Always provide the correct answer to the quiz
- Do not repeat the question in the feedback response
- Desist from using phrases like 'think again' 'try again' 'your response is wrong' instead use words like 'no, that is incorrect, did you forget to divide the total hours by two? etc

Observation indicates that learners tend to be more alert when they do quizzes than when they read learning materials. A good feedback is specific, constructive and encouraging, thus course designers and facilitators are encouraged to focus on performance and not on personality; emphasize strength rather than weakness; present honest and clear feedback (OPNz, 2013c).

d) The Close Link between Design and Facilitation

Facilitation is a pedagogical term that applies to learner-centered approach to teaching, as opposed to teacher-driven approaches. Thus, the teacher's role is moving from expert to one of facilitation – from 'sage on the stage' to 'guide on the side' (King, 1993). For the teacher to be able to be a guide on the side, learning activities need to be designed in a way that puts the learner at the center – where the learner controls the activities. The role of the tutor is to support and guide, not lead, thus a well-designed course needs to support such facilitation strategies. Thus course design can make a difference to the tutor workload by:

- Ensuring course information is comprehensive, well-structured and strategically placed on the course page and well-written
- Ensuring that course design supports and predicts communication needs and strategies
- Ensuring that interaction between students is 'engineered' through well-designed collaborative work instead of discussion forum without clear purpose
- Making use of tools such as quizzes to reinforce concept mastery
- Designing assessment of collaborative learning in such a way that the learner takes the responsibility for gathering the evidence for their contribution (OPNz, 2013d)

e) Designing Meaningful Assessment

The challenge was to design assessment based on authentic learning tasks that are embedded as a natural part of learning experience and not separate from it. Thus, assessment is seen as a means of helping the learner to learn more effectively and efficiently (Roberts, 2006). Online learning is presenting new ways of doing this especially in relation to assessment. Nicol (2007) proposed the following principles that could be used to guide good assessment and feedback:

- Facilitator should clarify what good performance is (goals, criteria, standards)
- Encourage time and effort on challenging learning tasks
- Deliver high-quality feedback information
- Encourage interaction and dialogue around learning
- Facilitate the development of self-assessment and reflection in learning
- Give learners choice in assessment – content and process (OPNz, 2013e)

f) Writing online assessment

In writing online assessment, the course provided the following insight:

- Learners should be told what the assessment is
- What resources or references may be useful or required
- Time Lines
- Who to contact for assistance or clarification
- What standards are expected for a given task and the criteria upon which it will be judged
- How the particular assessment task relates to the learning goals and competency outcomes (Australian National Training Authority, 2004).

g) Supporting a Learner during a Course

Online course often lack the learner-tutor dialogue that supports and provides confidence to learners. Thus, it is dangerous to assume that learners know what to do, when and why. Although adult learners fare better in situations where there is more ambiguity, it should not be assumed that structure is unnecessary. When working online, not providing structure may be the demise of the course (Pallof & Pratt, 2003). What then does learner support in online course look like? Providing scaffolding which means giving assistance to the learner on an as needed basis and decreasing the assistance as competence increases is a good starting point. Predicting the learners' questions and answering them clearly in resources that are clearly titled and easily accessible from the course page is also helpful.

h) Online Course Evaluation

To ensure appropriate and consistent learning design practice in our institutions and organizations, we need to have quality assurance procedures. This raises a number of questions, what is a quality online course? what do we measure and how? Oliver and Herrington (2003) posits that although principles of successful teaching and learning remain the same whatever the medium, factors influencing quality in e-learning are different. Below is an example of evaluation checklist used by my team mates for their online course evaluation.

Table 3: e-Learning evaluation checklist

Note: The checklist is based around the determination of critical elements within three main areas which describe the complete online setting: pedagogies - the learning activities which underpin the unit, resources - the content and information which are provided for the learners; and delivery strategies - issues associated with the ways in which the course is delivered to the learners.

Pedagogy

- Authentic tasks – Does the learning activities involve tasks that reflect the way in which the knowledge will be used in real life settings?
- Opportunities for collaboration – Could learners collaborate to create products that could not be produced individually?
- Learner-centered environment – Are there focus on student learning rather than teaching?
- Engaging task – Is the learning environment and tasks challenging and motivating?
- Meaningful assessment – Are authentic and integrated assessment used to evaluate learners' achievement?

Resources

- Accessibility – Are resources organized in ways that make them easily accessible?
- Currency – Is the age of resources appropriate to the subject matter?
- Richness – Does resources reflect a rich variety of perspectives?
- Purposeful use of the media – Was the media suitable for the purpose intended?
- Inclusivity – Does materials demonstrate social, cultural, and gender inclusively.

Delivery Strategies

- Reliable and robust interface – Are the materials accurate and error free in their operation?
- Clear goals, directions and learning plans – Were the unit information and expectation of student roles clear?
- Communication – Does the unit provides opportunities and encourages dialogue between learners and between teachers and learners?
- Appropriate bandwidth demands – Are the materials accessible without lengthy delays?
- Equity and accessibility – Are the unit materials and activities accessible and available to all learners?

CONCLUSION: EMPOWERMENT AND TRANSFORMATION OF LEARNERS

The debate on teaching methodology has continued to be vital reference for experiments in teaching and learning. In order to make learning active, empowering and transforming, there is the need to reinvent a new pedagogy that is participatory, dramatic and democratic in nature. This is because conventional teaching methods create a huge gulf between learners and their teacher during the process of learner's transformation. "Designing an Effective e-Learning Course: Experiences from an Open Polytechnic of New Zealand Course of 2013", opened up new frontiers and promoted change for learner empowerment, control and engagement. Learners here engaged and empowered themselves through learning experiences that prepared them to be active, creative and knowledgeable in design issues in e-learning. Designing a successful e-learning course was thus seen as part art and part science which involves appropriate utilization of learning and training theory, a good understanding of the electronic designs tools and equipment, appropriate understanding of the knowledge and/or skills to be taught as well as a blend of color, style, sound and video usage in a manner that educates while entertaining the student without distracting the learning experience (Steen, 2008). Specifically, the course posits that, in gathering information for a particular course, designers need to know the characteristics of the learner; where and how they can apply knowledge; create meaning learning activities and assessment; use learner-friendly tools and media and identify a means of evaluating the course page. The learning process of the learners and the world around them to which they actively gave meaning, is of course, determined by culture and time factors. This is important while looking for an empowering educational concept that would transform the learners for tomorrow's leadership, where transformation is an ongoing journey.

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