Chapter 1
An Appreciation of Diverse Approaches to Learning Design in Higher Education

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ABSTRACT

This chapter makes the case for acknowledging and appreciating the diverse paths that lead to the generation of designs for e-learning in higher education. It identifies and critically examines some of the tensions between current design practices in the higher education sector and those assumed by interoperability standards such as IMS Learning Design and learning objects. The likely imperatives of a more design-intensive model of e-learning for the organisation and culture of the academic workplace are considered and some simple practical techniques to support the generation of designs are described. The chapter introduces a proposal for the combination of pedagogic and generic design knowledge as a means for improving practice by promoting a collaborative multidisciplinary approach to help reverse the current dominance of technology. Finally, the chapter briefly outlines suggestions for further areas of interdisciplinary enquiry and development.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter describes the present, largely informal, approaches to developing designs for e-learning in higher education (HE) and examines how they relate to the emergence of interoperability standards, particularly that of IMS Learning Design (CETIS, 2009; IMS, 2009). This is contrasted to the situation in the distance learning, commercial and military training sectors where the abstraction, sharing and reuse of pedagogic designs and learning resources is comparatively well developed. In what might be described as 'mainstream' HE this kind of shared and formalised design-intensive activity is still relatively rare. This chapter aims to provide a critical commentary both on current learning design practice

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in HE and aspects of IMS Learning Design and describes the possible adoption of simple tools and methods to support improvement in practice. The chapter argues that a multidisciplinary approach is needed to overcome the current e-learning implementation problems that are frequently reported by practitioners from a variety of backgrounds.

The need to improve the quality of the design of the student learning experience in higher education is a longstanding issue and one that has been recognised by many influential educational authors including Biggs (2006), Ramsden (1992) and Laurillard (2002). For instance, the ambition for the 'Aligned Curriculum' in HE proposed by Biggs (2006) still remains a substantial challenge; where teaching aims, learning outcomes and assessment criteria are set in a coherent relationship with each other, supported by activities that facilitate the desired learning. So, questions relating to learning design also go straight to the heart of current major debates about quality and efficiency in higher education and learning. It is important to recognise that teaching in HE continues to be dominated by the traditional patterns of the campus-based face-to-face model, which can exert a tenacious hegemony over any attempts to change it (Agostinho, Harper, Oliver, Hedberg, &Wills, 2008). Yet, despite this, systems of HE teaching and education are also in a period of transition to meet the challenges posed by the need to supply quality flexible learning opportunities to a mass student population from increasingly diverse academic backgrounds.

This chapter is grounded in the practical experience of the author in helping subject matter experts to design online courses and learning resources over several years at the University of Stirling, Scotland, and participation in UK research projects that examined practitioners dealing with reuse and redesign of resources as learning objects. The chapter also draws on involvement in action research at the University of the Highlands and Islands Millennium Institute, Scotland that explored issues surrounding the extension of a more flexible curriculum in a federated geographically remote institution. From a wider perspective this chapter also includes inputs from the discussions and publications of the European UNFOLD project (UNFOLD, 2009) that brought together IMS Learning Design technical developers with teachers to discuss a wide range of issues involved in making usable software tools that teachers and institutions could use.

The chapter starts by reviewing some of the tensions between existing design practice in HE and the requirements of e-learning interoperability standards and identifies some important gaps in discussions about the creation of learning designs. The concept of a learning design continuum is then introduced, which can contain different types of representation and degrees of formalism. Next, some practical tried and tested approaches to generating learning designs are described. The discussion then goes on to combine some useful perspectives from the fields of pedagogic research and design studies. The chapter concludes with a discussion of how the topics covered may be integrated to provide a unified approach that is both broadly inclusive and supports diversity and creativity in e-learning design, and makes suggestions for further areas of work.

TENSIONS BETWEEN THE TECHNICAL DEVELOPER COMMUNITY AND MAINSTREAM EDUCATION

The IMS Learning Design specification aims to be able to supply a vocabulary, which teachers using any pedagogical method can use to express their designs for teaching. The core of this vocabulary assumes that the learning/teaching process can be expressed in terms of people in specified *groups* and *roles* engaging in *activities* in an *environment* that contains appropriate *resources* and *services*