

Oxford Brookes University, Pathfinder Programme,
Pilot phase project

Briefing paper 2 of 3

The following briefing has been prepared by one of the institutions participating in the pilot phase of the Pathfinder Programme. The programme is being led by the Higher Education Academy in partnership with the Joint Information Systems Committee. The funded initiation phase of the pilot was from October 2006 to September 2007 with work expected to continue at an institutional level thereafter.

Oxford Brookes University, Pathfinder Briefing Paper 2: Course Redesign Intensives

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This briefing paper is directed at Higher Education Institution managers responsible for e-learning development, educational developers, e-learning support staff and academic practitioners. Its aim is to inform this audience about the e-learning Course Redesign Intensive workshop format, its aims and benefits, factors that contribute to its success and special requirements for implementing similar activities.

1. How did the Course Redesign Intensives come about?

The e-learning Benchmarking exercise conducted at Oxford Brookes in 2006 highlighted staff development in e-learning as a current strength and an area for continuing focus for e-learning strategic development. One aim of our Pathfinder project was to enhance our existing portfolio of e-learning support methods and activities — workshops, seminars, user documentation, exemplars, consultancy, etc — by incorporating activities that would foster collaborative networks of e-learning practitioners within the institution and increase e-learning design capacity.

The Course Redesign Intensive workshop format is an example of this. Oxford Brookes University began to deliver this event in late 2003. It was allied with the implementation of our e-learning strategy at the time, which made academic schools the locus of development: schools were required to develop their own e-learning strategies and to appoint e-learning coordinators and learning technologists to support the work (see Sharpe, Benfield and Francis 2006). This approach encouraged schools to identify key e-learning developments and systematically and explicitly allocate resources to them.

The Intensives were organised specifically to help kick start e-learning developments that had been identified by school e-learning strategies. They are for course teams who have *already made the commitment* to e-learning redesign of their courses, whether 'blended' or fully online. They aim to:

- encourage a multi-professional, team-based approach to e-learning curriculum development
- focus resources on high impact developments, e.g. undergraduate programmes involving large staff and student numbers; programmes with identifiable educational needs that can be addressed by technology
- speed up development times
- cascade e-learning design expertise into academic schools

The primary aim is to develop the practice of course design and development in expanded, multi-disciplinary teams, by linking academics with educational developers, learning technologists, course administrators and school e-learning coordinators from the outset. For decades now the literature has abounded with recommendations for multi-professional course team approaches to e-learning development (see, for example, Laurillard 1993; HEFCE 1996; American Productivity and Quality Centre 1999; Calvert 2001). Systematic, institutionally-supported course redesign activities can significantly improve both the extent and effectiveness of technology use in higher education. Twigg (2005) for example, cites enhanced

quality of learning, improved retention, diversifying access to higher education learning opportunities, increasing capacity (student numbers) and reducing costs as results of systematic course redesign projects in US universities and colleges.

Our review of UK undergraduate blended e-learning (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts et al. 2006, p 4) identified course redesign as a key success factor for blended e-learning:

Throughout the review, staff repeatedly identified engaging in course redesign as critical to their success. The valuable features of the 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.

2. What happens in the course redesign intensives?

The Course Redesign Intensive format involves bringing several course teams together in one place for two days. For pragmatic reasons we have so far only worked with teams re-designing existing courses, rather than developing new ones from scratch. Teams start with a review of their primary objectives. The redesign 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 and periodically cross-fertilisation happens when they act as peer reviewers of other teams' work.

The key benefits of the format are:

- existing course development teams are provided with additional expertise in e-learning
- creativity and expertise are concentrated into space and time, making use of the 'many hands make light work' principle; this concentration of resources offers teams a way to get a quick result.

We anticipate that after two days course teams will have designed the basic structure of an online course, built some activities in the Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), with perhaps some other elements designed but still needing production.

Since the first run in December 2003 the format has been through several iterations. These include: running the two days consecutively or one or two weeks apart; compressing it to one day with individual follow-up from e-learning developers and learning technologists substituting for the second day; extending it to three or more days, usually by incorporating evaluation activities; running it for one programme team rather than two or more. It has been delivered both internally at Brookes and externally to two other universities. The core, invariant elements of the format are:

- **direct invitation:** workshops are delivered when a 'critical mass' of course teams have been identified by educational developers, learning technologists or school e-learning coordinators as wanting to develop e-learning innovations. Self-nominating teams responding to a short publicity drive may fill some additional places.
- **expanded course teams:** whole course teams are brought together with e-learning specialists to work intensively for two days to redesign a course for blended e-learning. The e-learning specialists include educational developers from the Oxford Centre for Staff and Learning Development (OCSLD), at least one central learning technologist from Media Workshop and the school learning technologist. Wherever possible and certainly with programme teams, we strongly encourage administrators to attend as well as academic team members.

(Note: 'course' can mean either a module or a whole programme and so 'course teams' may vary in size between 2 for a module redesign to 15-20 for a whole BSc programme.)

- **cross-disciplinarity:** creative thinking in the design process is promoted through structured, cross-disciplinary interaction. This happens using a repeated, iterative peer review process called 'critical friends', where members of other course teams review and suggest improvements to designs.
- **sharing exemplars:** the value of good exemplars — 'show me how they do online discussions in Engineering'; 'how do you get online groups to share the work around?' etc — is well recognised (Sharpe 2005). It is generally accepted that there are plenty of case studies/exemplars available. The problem is they tend not to be easily accessible to practitioners, who often need them 'just in time'. Bringing numbers of experts together uses human mediation to make accessible a larger range of exemplars than is otherwise possible.
- **challenge:** learning designs are repeatedly challenged through the critical friends peer review process. Challenges to teams' designs derive from the variety of experiences, disciplinary practices and pedagogic beliefs that they interact with throughout the two days. The idea is to continually push teams to think outside their comfort zone. Risk assessment exercises ask teams to consider practically how to 'make it so'.
- **blue skies thinking:** day one is spent on high level design thinking and designing to capture the right 'blend' of e-learning activities and the appropriate technologies. This is another means to encourage teams to concentrate on what they want to achieve, rather than obstacles.
- **rationales:** teams identify the one or two key educational rationales for their use of technology to enhance learning. In our review of undergraduate blended e-learning (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts et al. 2006) we identified clarity about educational purpose as a key success factor for blended e-learning. By identifying their main purposes in adopting technology, course teams can more effectively choose the learning outcomes and learning activities that offer the most fruitful areas for development work.
- **building:** day two involves building, in the VLE or other institutional e-learning environment, activities that students can actually use. Lack of staff time for curriculum development is one of the most commonly cited barriers to e-learning development. Helping teams develop real implementations in just a few hours can help make the mountain of development time look more like a molehill. It also alleviates insecurity about unfamiliar technology, another of the common barriers to e-learning development.
- **capturing explicit designs:** throughout the process course teams produce visual representations of their designs for display to themselves and others (Figures 1 & 2). These designs are repeatedly updated/amended.
- **focus on learning design, not technology:** a minimum level of training/expertise with the institutional VLE and/or other electronic learning environment is required for participation. The presence of learning technologists allows teams to realise their designs consistent with the capacities of the available tools.

RESOURCES	TASKS	SUPPORT
CV TEMPLATE	EXPLANATION OF TASK	EXPLANATION OF TASK
EXAMPLES OF COMPLETED CV'S	DESIGN PERSONAL LOG INTO TEMPLATE	
SUBMITTED DRAFT CV'S	RESEARCH DO'S + DON'T'S BEST PRACTICE etc	TUTORIAL FOR FEEDBACK
COMPLETED TEMPLATE	SUBMIT ON-LINE	INSTRUCTIONS HOW TO UPLOAD
	FEEDBACK ON-LINE	

Figure 1: example of a learning design

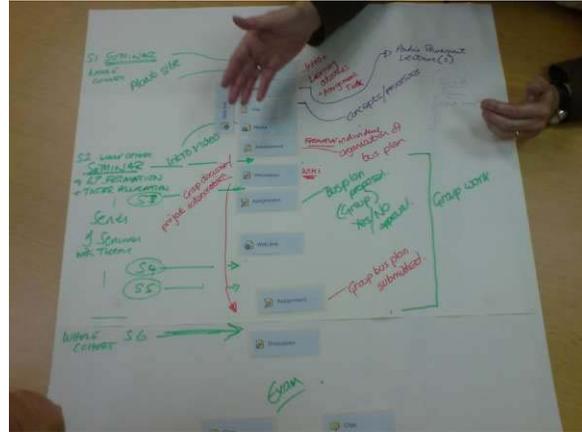


Figure 2: example of a learning design

- Designs are usually captured as images for continued use in development work following the workshop. They may also be used as staff development resources and/or evaluation artefacts. One idea connected to our CIRCLE repository project (see <http://mw.brookes.ac.uk/display/circle/Home>) is the development of staff development learning objects based on representations of these captured designs and their eventual implementations. Lately we tend to encourage the use of a template for learning design sequences (Figure 3) developed by the Australian AUTC project (see <http://www.learningdesigns.uow.edu.au/index.html>). This template adapts easily to representation of institutional tools, including those within VLEs like Discussion boards, chats, assignments etc, within the middle Tasks column.

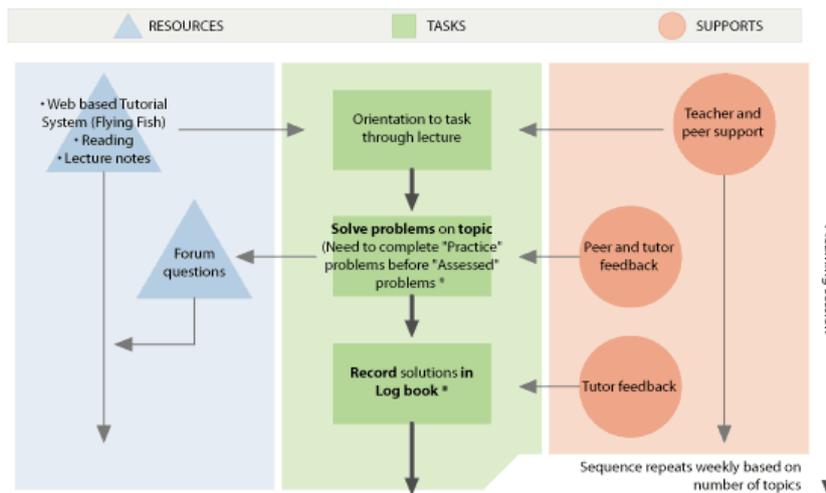


Figure 3: template for recording designs from AUTC

- **range of well-regarded design tools and templates:** participants are offered a small range of design frameworks, tools and templates to choose from and use. We recognise that there is no single, universally accepted

model or approach to e-learning design and given the diversity of the course teams involved it is important to find a model or framework that offers each team a 'good fit' with their educational beliefs and intentions. The frameworks and tools we offer are chosen from those well regarded in the literature and among practitioners. Examples include Salmon's Five Stage model and e-tivities (Salmon 2002; Salmon 2004), Chickering and Ehrmann's seven principles (Chickering and Ehrmann 1996) and materials from the JISC Effective Practice with E-Learning resources (JISC 2004).

- **constructive alignment:** the input we provide to the Intensives always places a high level of importance on constructive alignment (Biggs 2003), in particular the question: how will students' e-learning activity be valued within your assessment regime? We try to be accepting of the underpinning philosophies and pedagogies that teams bring with them to the exercise. However the numerous examples of e-learning designs failing through being 'bolted on' have taught us to be rigorous about aligning learning objectives, learning methods and assessment.

3. What have we achieved?

Almost 120 staff from 26 course teams in three institutions have participated the Brookes Course Redesign Intensives since December 2003. Some examples of the range of achievements are:

- the redesign of three large inter-professional modules (Partnerships in Practice, PIP) spanning the 3 years of the undergraduate programme in the Brookes School of Health and Social Care, moving the school in the course of one academic year from a position of little use of the VLE to one in which almost all undergraduate students (about 900) in the school and significant numbers of staff (almost 30) became involved in interactive online learning.
- the development of learning designs re-usable in multiple disciplinary contexts at the University of Brighton.
- the design and delivery of a fully online MA in Real Estate Management at Brookes.
- redesign of a pre-registration Health Care programme for blended e-learning at another university.
- the development of online language learning resources to support international students in the Brookes Summer School.
- positive anecdotal feedback from a Pathfinder institution where we have run the Intensives, including feedback that the format can be adopted and adapted successfully there.

4. What next?

In Pathfinder we encountered two course design/redesign frameworks with similar approaches and aims to our Intensives: Carpe Diem at University of Leicester and CABLE at University of Hertfordshire. Our involvement in the CHEETAH and CABLE Transfer Pathfinder continuation projects will enable us to evaluate the principles and methods used in all three formats. CHEETAH involves reciprocal delivery and evaluation of Carpe Diem and the Course Redesign Intensives at Leicester and Oxford Brookes. In CABLE Transfer OCSLD will evaluate CABLE delivery in four Pathfinder institutions in 2008.

5. What have we learned?

We have learned several things about implementing the course intensives.

First, serendipity plays a big role in some of our most successful projects. The presence of the Course Redesign Intensives within our portfolio of staff development activities has given us a way to capitalise on fortunate coincidences of connections with particular course teams and/or individuals seeking new ways to address educational issues or problems. For example, recently a single announcement that we would run a compressed Intensive to intersect with the imminent upgrade of the Brookes VLE elicited more requests to participate than we could accommodate.

Second, the impact of the external environment should not be underestimated. All the design expertise and support in the world cannot compensate for sudden losses of staff, funding or markets for courses. Part of the Course Redesign Intensive's impact is connecting members of curriculum development teams with broader, stable networks of expert practitioners who can support them long term. Thus, a Real Estate Management MA programme put their project on hold until four years after their first involvement in the Intensive, when they sought to be involved in a new Intensive that shortly thereafter brought their new online MA to fruition.

Third, involving educational developers at a very early stage of the redesign tends to facilitate evaluation being built into the design. In some cases this means curriculum teams seek to engage developers as external evaluators of the course. In all cases it means that evaluation is designed in to the e-learning implementation. As we have noted elsewhere (Sharpe, Benfield, Roberts et al. 2006), the more impressive examples of e-learning designs, those that are sustainable and make real impact on the student experience, tend to involve iterative development over several years using student feedback.

Fourth, the Intensives are the beginning of a process, not an end in themselves. Built into the model is follow-up support for the longer term, with expectations of regular consultation and feedback indefinitely. This builds trust and supports the model of iterative improvements to course designs mentioned above.

Fifth, we have been adaptable, adjusting the format of the intensives to suit special requests or requirements by course teams. We have been asked to run part of the intensive for just one team, to extend the format to three days or compress it to one, and we have tried never to say 'no'. Of course we warn that the aims and expected outcomes of the event will necessarily change under these circumstances.

Finally, expanded, multi-professional course design teams are not 'business as usual'. This approach needs high-level institutional support. One of the more obvious problems that institutions will confront with the Intensives format is making it possible for multi-professional course teams to find two or more days to come together. As mentioned above, at Brookes the Course Redesign Intensives came about and were nurtured by an institutional e-learning strategy. Strong support for e-learning from senior management and the nomination of particular programmes for strategic development by school and/or department heads provide teams with the impetus and acceptance they need to participate. 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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