

Chapter IX

The Changing Role of an Instructional Designer in the Implementation of Blended Learning at an Australian University

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Abstract

This chapter presents a case study that reflects on the changing approach of an instructional designer at an Australian university. The designer moved from one-to-one interactions with subject matter experts in the design of traditional print-based distance learning courses to adopting a pedagogical framework that guides the use of technology in hybrid course design

and encourages the subject matter experts to design their courses in a way that emphasises what Wenger (2005) has called the “horizontalisation” of learning. The subject experts were encouraged to experience some of the benefits of a community of practice (CoP) approach for themselves. The study contrasts the traditional approach to design with the framework used here, in which social constructivist principles of learning were offered to the subject matter experts in a way that was immediately engaging and usable for them. The chapter presents the subject experts’ evaluation of the effectiveness of the approach described.

Background Influences of Changing Pedagogy and the Application of Technology to Instructional Design Practice

The development of mass higher education and the increasing access to technology has presented institutions of higher education with a variety of learners requiring greater flexibility in the way they access programmes and services (Laurillard, 2002). Until recently, distance education was largely structured on a rigid “delivery” model, organised around teaching and assessment rather than learning. The impetus for hybrid or blended learning depends partly on a growing application of social constructivist pedagogy that focuses on learner-centred, rather than teacher-centred design, and partly on the need to develop enhanced efficiency in the provision of teaching. These two pressures work in opposite directions and the sector is currently in the process of coming to terms with what these shifts imply in practice. Interactive education, which focuses on connection, interaction, exploration and discovery, rather than the transmission of information, moves the teacher away from the centre of the instructional activity and focuses on active student learning. These pressures also impact on the traditional instructional systems design (ISD) approach described as the “reflective process of translating principles of learning and instruction into plans for instructional materials, activities information resources and evaluation” (Smith & Ragan, 2005, p. 4).

Initially, most higher education institutions viewed investment in the application of information and communication technology as a way of delivering their educational provision to new kinds of students, typically off-campus. However, the idea that advanced learning technology could provide both more effective pedagogy and lower costs has been largely dispelled through the last few years in which e-learning has been conceptualised as the delivery of a product. It is now quite widely accepted that a sound pedagogical underpinning has been largely missing in these developments. A course does not become “learner-centred” by going online; in some respects it becomes less so. Perhaps the most striking example of the gap between e-learning rhetoric and the reality of implementation has been provided by the expensive failure of the UK e-University (House of Commons Education and Skills Committee Report, 2003). In their study of the failed uptake of e-learning in America, Zemsky and Massy (2004) suggest that, “the hard fact is that e-learning took off before people really knew how to use it” (p. iii). While many institutions of higher education are adopting technology, Ikenberry (1999) suggests that in most instances “the revolution proceeds without any clear

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