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THE LEARNING DESIGN & COURSE CREATION WORKSHOP: PEDAGOGY AND IMPACT

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Abstract

The Open University, UK (UKOU) has a long relationship with the Chinese Open University sector. Since 2014 this relationship has included staff from the UKOU facilitating the Learning Design & Course Creation (LDCC) Workshop as a human resource development activity for the design of online and distance learning (ODL). The LDCC Workshop has been delivered in both face-to-face and online distance settings. By November 2022 around 850 Chinese staff, from at least eight different institutions, will have participated in 33 instances of the LDCC Workshop. The LDCC Workshop model aims to align UKOU learning design frameworks and practices with constructivist and student-focused pedagogies. Through a series of structured, collaborative activities it challenges participants to design an ODL course of their own in a compressed timeframe and offers opportunities for a re-examination of their own design practices. This model has been adopted to maximise support for, and manage changes to, the professional teaching identities of participants who may be required to adapt from designing traditional education to ODL. Previous evidence of the impact of the LDCC Workshop has been consistently gathered by the facilitators and fed back into further developments and publications. This presentation will describe in detail the rationale, model and strategies adopted by the LDCC Workshop and report on the unpublished findings of some in-depth impact interviews with past participants which were conducted in 2022.

Key words: professional development, learning design, impact

INTRODUCTION & CONTEXT

An increasing percentage of educators and executive leaders in higher education (HE) believe online and distance learning (ODL) will be a fundamental component of their future teaching and learning offerings [1] but research also suggests that substantial gaps exist between the perceived skills and competencies of educators to design and implement ODL approaches, and the professional development (PD) available to them [1], [2], [3]. For example, in a 2018 study of distance educators, staff at leading ODL higher education institution, University of South Africa (UNISA), perceived themselves as having low levels of competency in the roles of technology expert and instructional designer, when compared with other roles such as knowledge expert, and self-identified a need for increased levels of future PD to support these roles [2]. However, such PD must be designed carefully to mitigate high levels of educator anxiety [1], support changing professional teaching identities [4], and improve perceptions of quality [3], [5].

Rapidly growing student numbers and an increasing demand for quality teaching in the ODL sector of Chinese HE is driving rapid educational change [5], [6], [7]. To help manage this change a need for PD for the effective design of ODL has been identified [3], [8], [9]. The Learning Design & Course Creation (LDCC) Workshop is a model of PD that has been specifically developed to support both the OU network, and the wider ODL education community, in China. It synthesises ODL educational principles and examples of practice currently in use at the UKOU to address the kinds of challenges and changes identified above.

Since around 2010, learning design (LD) has been in use in UK, European and Australian HE educational settings for designing ODL and whilst specific implementations vary depending on context, the three principles of *guidance*, *representation* and *sharing* remain consistent [10]. The interpretation of LD that is currently in practice at the UKOU, and reflected in the LDCC Workshop, has its foundation

in the findings from the OU Learning Design Initiative (OULDI) which ran from 2007 to 2012. The UKOU and 13 other higher education institutions participated in the *Institutional Approaches to Curriculum Design and Delivery* programme which was co-funded by the not-for-profit Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) and the European Union (EU) [11]. Wide ranging interviews with staff at these institutions revealed a multitude of design practices. As a consequence of the OULDI, since 2012 LD practitioners at the UKOU have sought to embed constructivist approaches that are student- focused and based around the three principles of:

- i. encouraging design conversations and collaboration in design
- ii. using tools, instruments, and activities to describe and share designs
- iii. developing learning analytics (LA) approaches to support and guide decision-making

In the daily life of the UKOU, LD workshops provide a mechanism for bringing together multi-disciplinary staff in teams to design new curriculum. Outputs from these workshops are then recognised as key components in an internal quality assurance process [12]. The pedagogy of the LDCC Workshop provides a structured way to present design for ODL educational principles, tools, activities, and examples of practice currently in use at the UKOU which, for simplicity, are referred to collectively as LDCC approaches. Whilst some evidence of the effectiveness of PD that aligns LD frameworks with constructivist and student-focused pedagogies does exist (see below) further detailed work is necessary to explore the specific nature and extent of impact in the Chinese HE context.

In a previously published study [13], feedback from the LDCC Workshop was used to demonstrate impact on 5 Belarussian ODL design teams tasked with creating five ODL courses as part of the Enhancement of Lifelong Learning in Belarus (BELL) Project. The study used the Academic Professional Development Effectiveness Framework (APDEF) indicators [14] to demonstrate that the pedagogy and content of the LDCC Workshop was effective in preparing the design teams to design and create their chosen modules [13]. Another published study [3], mapped feedback from 220 LDCC Workshop participants from three Chinese OUs against the Instructional Design Competencies Framework provided by the International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) to demonstrate how learning design could enhance quality. Based on this analysis, the study suggested conceptualising competencies required for Chinese ODL designers around being a *professional, a collaborator, a communicator, and a student-focused educator* [3]. Current research [15], that employed a survey of 134 Chinese LDCC Workshop participants explored the pedagogy of the LDCC Workshop in detail and suggested the likelihood that there were important impact narratives around the extent of practical implementation, perceptions of difficulty of implementation and impacts on professional teaching identity waiting to be uncovered. To reveal these narratives in-depth interviews with 14 LDCC Workshop participants from five Chinese OUs were conducted in 2022, and these interviews form the evidence base for this AAOU22 conference presentation.

The research question that guides this conference presentation is:

RQ. What evidence is there that LDCC Workshop participants went on to implement any of the LDCC approaches into their own design for ODL practice?

METHODS

Ethics approval for this study was secured from the UKOU Human Research Ethics Committee (HREC). Previous participants were approached by their institutions and information and consent forms were provided. In total, 14 previous participants from five different OUs agreed to take part in the study. The ten-question interview instrument focused on four areas of interest: a. establishing identity, b. impact on practice, c. institutional context & support, and, d. impact on professional identity, and was shared with the interviewees prior to interview. Interviews were facilitated by Author² & Author³ in a mixture of English and Mandarin using MS Teams software. The interviews ranged in length from 1 to 2 hours. Interview audio/visual files were downloaded to a secure MS Teams site along with automatically generated initial transcripts. The original audio/visual files were securely shared with professional translators hired for the purpose and based in China, who checked the transcription and completed full translations into English. These English transcriptions were anonymised then checked for accuracy and nuanced meaning by an interpreter who had previously worked as a translator during the LDCC Workshop, and Author³.

An inductive thematic coding approach was employed by Author¹ and another UKOU researcher to ensure consistency of analysis. Once initial narratives had been established, transcriptions were imported into NVivo12 software for detailed analysis.

RESULTS

The analysis allowed for the identification of six 'student-focused learning design implementation narratives' which are summarised here and organised according to the extent of agency (from low to high) expressed in the interviews. The narratives are not exclusive, meaning that interviewees may appear in more than one, and that the themes are often interrelated. Interviewees are identified by a number, e.g. #01, and institution, e.g. OUZ, in square brackets, e.g. [#01-OUZ] where direct reference is required.

1. 'Looking for Opportunities' Narrative.

This narrative was evidenced in four of the interviews: [#05-OUY], [#06-OUV], [#08-OUV] and [#10-OUY]. It is characterised by interviewees being motivated to implement at least one of the LDCC approaches into their practical work but feeling that they did not have the agency to do so. As one interviewee said, 'Maybe I want to implement it, but to be honest, I lack the conditions to implement' [#08-OUV]. Interviewees identified certain enablers that they felt, if present, might help them to implement. These included improved technology, institutional guidance or support, better cooperation within the OU system and between departments, and responsibility for a reduced volume of students.

2. 'Student Profiles' Narrative

This narrative was evidenced in three of the interviews: [#03-OUV], [#07-OUY] and [#09-OUY]. It is characterised by the interviewees making changes to their practice to get to know their students better as inspired by the student profiles activity in the LDCC Workshop. These interviewees indicated they had started scholarship initiatives to improve the gathering of learning analytics or feedback from their students to enable the adjustment of learning designs based on that data. They interpreted these initiatives as being closely associated with the more general student-focused pedagogy discussed in the LDCC Workshop.

3. 'Indirect OU Inspiration' Narrative

This narrative was evidenced in three of the interviews: [#09-OUY], [#11-OUY] and [#12-OUV]. It is characterised by the interviewees making changes to their practice as inspired by ODL approaches not necessarily core to the LDCC Workshop but referred to in passing, or inspired by other parts of the UKOU, or in conversations with UKOU staff. However, these initiatives were design based and included, for example, the development of introductory module videos, a screen reader for visually impaired students, audio texts for commuters, case studies, animations, and a mobile learning app. As one interviewee put it, 'every time I was awarded or being acknowledged, I got the idea from the [UK]OU' [#11-OUY]. In general, interviewees in this narrative were motivated by a desire to improve the experience of study and were able to exhibit some agency over the design of their module in implementing these improvements.

4. 'Learning Design Framework' Narrative

This narrative was evidenced in two of the interviews: [#11-OUY] and [#13-OUW]. It is characterised by the interviewees changing the organisation of a module around the concept of time rather than, '...like before that we simply offer them [students] the universal teaching materials and resources platform, and ask them to arrange the study themselves' [#13-OUW]. The implementation of this fundamental LDCC approach into practice was driven by a perceived need to improve student motivation to study and provide a more structured learning experience.

5. 'Constructivist' Narrative

This narrative was evidenced in one of the interviews: [#14-OUX]. It is characterised by the interviewee adopting the constructivist LDCC pedagogy into the internal teacher professional development and training approach in that institution. In this implementation past participants drew on their LDCC modelled constructivist experience to design teacher training that was activity-based and outcome-orientated in which, 'teachers are more like a guide...rather than simply passing on the knowledge'

[#14-OUX]. This implementation was driven by a motivation to enhance the quality of the education provided.

6. 'Learning Design Process' Narrative

This narrative was evidenced in four of the interviews: [#01-OUZ], [#02-OUZ], [#04-OUZ] and [#09-OUY]. It is characterised by the mandated implementation of LDCC approaches into curriculum standards and practice to enhance quality and achieve higher accreditation. LDCC approaches such as vision statement, learning outcomes, student profiles and activity type classifications have been 'adapted...', so that they, '...are easier for teachers from our school to understand and apply' [#04-OUZ] and are included in a module specification report for which institutional approval is required. For OUZ, this constitutes the implementation of a complete learning design process adopted from the LDCC Workshop.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE WORK

The 14 interviews revealed a variety of implementations of LDCC approaches into practice and demonstrate that the LDCC Workshop provided an effective PD activity for many of the Chinese OU staff who participated. The narratives suggest that implementation was dependent on both the interviewees agency and appropriate enablers being in place to support implementation. The interviews also demonstrate that many participants placed value on the constructivist, student-focused pedagogy of the workshop itself as a model for their own practice. For example, 'the focus is more on us practicing than simply having lecturers talk, which reflects the features of being student-centred, so I think this training activity, this way of teaching is excellent' [#08-OUV]. For other Chinese HE faced with the challenges of guiding and supporting their staff in designing quality ODL, the LDCC Workshop should be viewed as providing a valuable model. These elements of the study will be expanded on in the AAOU22 conference presentation.

The interviews also provide a rich source of data and information about the impact of the LDCC Workshop on changes to the professional identity of the participants that is out of scope here. This has been highlighted as a underrepresented concern of PD for the design of ODL (Philipsen et al, 2019) and future work will, therefore, involve the applying of the Personal Interpretive Framework approach (Kelchtermans, 2009) to the interviews to uncover some of these narratives.

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