

OULDI project

Narrative 23

Rebecca Galley is principle project officer for the Open University Learning Design Initiative (OULDI¹) project. Rebecca has extensive experience as an educator working in a variety of college and workplace contexts, including 'Returners' groups (i.e. students returning to education or work) before lecturing in education in an HE in FE context. She has been working on the OULDI project for three years and has been very much engaged with the development and piloting of the OULDI representations set, including delivering workshops and supporting teams in the use of the templates. As a result of her role on OULDI, she and a colleague were asked by the Principle Investigator of an OER project to do some mapping of an existing module for benchmarking purposes and then follow this up with a review of the redesign module to enable identification and monitoring of design decisions and changes. She had already conducted two other reviews of existing university modules using the representations, and had found them to be a useful way of structuring a review:

"There are a number of ways that we can look at a course or curriculum offer and the OULDI representations are by no means the only ones we could use, but these three do seem to be a useful way of just checking through some of the key aspects from a student perspective [...] I was fairly sure that they would work ok"

Previously though, the reviews had been conducted alongside members of the module team, and a big part of the impact of those reviews was that module team members felt that they had a much better understanding of what the module was about and what the redesign focus might be. Rebecca was concerned that if the team was not represented in the review process there was a risk that they wouldn't be able to make good use of the representations. She felt this was a particular issue for this project because some learning design work had already been done on another of the project's modules by other members of the OULDI team and this work had not been used at all:

"In particular both X and Y have done a fair amount of learning design work on [this] and the other [OER project] module but in both cases it was almost

¹ For more about the OULDI project see <http://www.open.ac.uk/blogs/OULDI/>

entirely disregarded so I guess I was concerned that what we were being asked to do would actually be used!"

Early in the process Rebecca was also alerted to the fact that there might be some confusion in the US team about what the design review might be for:

"The B2S project manager suggested that we make it really clear that the review we were doing wasn't a quality control activity. There is a quality kite-mark used in the US for instructional design and it was really important that the team didn't think this was something similar"

To help ensure that the representations would be used and understood by the B2S project, Rebecca decided to write a 'wrap-around' report for each module to communicate and explain what she had done, and what each review might suggest. In addition she wrote a reflective log of her activity so that she could capture both the process and any emerging challenges.

It was decided that she would take the Module Map and Learning Outcomes Views and her colleague would take the Pedagogy Profile. She would then review the representations and identify any key features of the module and any emerging potential 'design challenges'. She started with the Module Map and it quickly became clear that the tutor role was an important feature of the module's design. She commented in her reflective log:

"I have been 'retrofitting' [the original module] into the Module Map. It took most of the day but I think it should be really useful to the [project team] as they do the redesign. In particular the role of the tutor is so significant in this module but I believe that the intention is to re-design the course so that students can study on the course by themselves. If they don't do a good job there is a real risk that student motivation will be low and attrition high"

She noted down a series of questions she was using to interrogate the Module Map representation of the module:

- o *Who or what is at the centre of the pedagogical structure? Students, tutors, or content?*
- o *How is content presented to students? In themes, study blocks or sequential activities?*
- o *How do students navigate through the materials? Does the tutor guide them, do they make their own choices, or is the content laid out as a structured pathway?*

- o *How are the needs of students that are more or less confident than the average provided for through activities?*
- o *Are there repeated activity patterns evident? What might be the impact of any repetition on student experience?*
- o *How do students communicate with each other and with their tutor? What impact might this communication have on the learning and teaching experience?*
- o *How do students know they are learning? Can they prove progression to themselves and others?*
- o *How do they know what they need to improve and how to improve? Do students set their own learning goals or are they set by others?*
- o *The OER will need to work without a tutor. What is the role of the tutor in the original course? What might happen if that role is simply removed?*

As she worked on the Module Map she became aware that she was finding it hard to stay objective, and she found herself tending making assumptions about what the learners would be like and how they would experience the material:

“It’s been quite hard not to have my old [college] students in mind while I’ve been reviewing this module though of course the US students will be different (i.e. they are students who have successfully got a place at college, they have a different educational ‘history’ etc)”.

She then used the Pedagogy Profile representation completed by her colleague to review the module, and again noted down the questions that she used:

- o *Are there any significant differences between the profile and what might be expected for a course of this type? What are these, and can they be accounted for? How might they impact on learning and teaching?*
- o *What are the expected skills and expectations of learners in relation to the ways they study and learn (for students studying this original module and the students studying the new one)? How far do these cohere (or not) with the activities as represented in this profile? What might be the impacts on learning and teaching?*
- o *Does the pedagogy profile ‘fit’ with students envisioned next steps? For example if students are likely to be required to become increasingly independent or active learners, are there enough opportunities to practice working in this way?*
- o *Are students used to a particular type of learning activity? Does this course move learners towards similar or different types of activity? What might the impact on learning and teaching be?*

- o *Does the workload look reasonable? Is it evenly distributed across the course? If not, what might the impacts on learning and teaching be?*

She recognised that this representation in particular can be quite difficult to complete and relies on the person mapping the module understanding what the primary intent of an activity is in relation to what it is expected students will *do* and how long they might take:

“The categories relate to what it is anticipated that students do to learn rather than what might or might not be happening at a cognitive level, and can only begin to represent what was intended not what actually might happen. For example when students are instructed to discuss an issue or share ideas in a forum, the intention is that they communicate with each other but in practice the majority of students might just read what others have written (assimilation) or write a statement which doesn’t link to the wider discussion (productive). The representation also shows roughly how student study hours are distributed across the course, and how much time remained for ‘self-directed’ study i.e. a time management task, recapping learning, etc, but to be fair we can only really best-guess at how long they will take to complete an activity.”

She then attempted to complete a Learning Outcomes View of the module but found this very difficult and generally unproductive:

“What I initially attempted to do is group the activity level outcomes under module outcomes headings to see if there were any gaps or patterns between what was taught and what was planned and assessed. However, the activity level outcomes really do not fit with the module level outcomes in this way, and the exercise became a bit too subjective to be useful. [Colleague] and I briefly reviewed the fit between the two different sets of outcomes and module descriptors across a variety of documents, and felt that the activity level outcomes offered a much better fit with the broader aims and intent of the module than the module level outcomes. This is why we suggested keeping the activity level outcomes and reworking the module level ones”

Again she detailed the questions she found herself using to review the module from a constructive alignment perspective:

- o *How well are learning outcomes, tasks and assessment intentions (formative and summative) communicated to students? What is the impact of this on learning and teaching?*
- o *How clear is the alignment between outcomes, activity and assessment? At what level does alignment primarily occur? Course level, unit level or activity level?*

- o *Is the notion of alignment used to explain the purpose of activities and assessment tasks to students? What is the impact of this on learning and teaching?*
- o *How might students experience any non-alignment, particularly if studying the course as an OER without tutor support?*
- o *Are there any implicit or 'hidden' outcomes? How well do these align with activities and assessment? Can these be made explicit? What would the impact be?*

Several months later, Rebecca was asked to conduct a review of the re-designed module, and she followed the same procedure, and used the same questions, to ensure that the reviews would be comparable. She was surprised to see how different the redesigned module was from a pedagogical perspective, and found it really difficult to report objectively about the changes made and their potential impacts:

"I have found it unusually hard to stay objective about the design, and I think this is in part because of cultural expectations/ assumptions I have about what pedagogy 'ought to' look like, and where the power should sit in the learning and teaching process. I also think there are likely to be some overlaps with what has/ will be covered in [the usability] testing (i.e. I may well have over-reached my scope in places!)"

Overall, Rebecca found that the representations exceeded her expectations in terms of what she felt they could reveal to her about a module's key learning and teaching features, but warns that the reviewers beliefs, knowledge and experiences of education will still significantly flavour any expert review – that the representations do not in themselves serve to make the review more or less objective or reliable.

"I found it fascinating what the representations revealed about each module and the differences (and similarities) between them. In fact I think it's fair to say that they worked better than I imagined they would as a way of benchmarking and comparing modules. It's always been a bit of a concern of mine that actually the representations themselves wouldn't show that much and that it was the process that they informed that was key [...] I should say though that staying objective was really difficult and I know that despite my best efforts my own preconceptions and beliefs will have coloured both the way I completed the representation templates and the review itself. Maybe this isn't a bad thing - and perhaps that is what you are asking for when you ask for an expert review - but I think it needs to be recognised because it impacts on how these representations should be shared with others, and how far they can be considered to be 'reliable' representations of a learning event".