

OULDI-JISC Project

Narrative 16

Cecilia Garrido is the Associate Dean of Learning and Teaching in her faculty. She has been associated off and on with the OULDI project for four years, and she co-developed the first Learning Design Challenge 1-day workshop which was held in her faculty in 2009. In that first workshop Cecilia was struck by two things in particular. Firstly that in engaging with the OULDI activities and tools, teams were able to complete a significant amount of design work in a comparatively short amount of time, and that secondly, when teams had the usual constrictions of approval processes removed, they seemed able to focus more clearly on the whole learning and teaching experience rather than the "bits and pieces" i.e. the study texts, media, images etc:

"It actually illustrated in a very short period of time, how much you could achieve if you had the time to plan [...] and at the end of the day, they could show something for it. [Module teams] said that if they had been using a real traditional way of designing it would have taken them a much longer time and they wouldn't have been so successful because they were focused on the approach. So that was one thing – how much you could achieve by planning up front. The other thing was that in that experience we wouldn't allow them to start with "well, I want 3 pieces of that" [...] people were not constrained by the things that happen in a traditional way of designing a module. The thing they usually do it start by putting in a Business Appraisal without any planning".

This workshop highlighted for Cecilia the tensions between the university's module production system (called the Stage gate process), and in particular the Business Appraisal and module specification (REP03) documents associated with it, and the effective design of a coherent learning and teaching experience:

"So people, [take] things that they have plucked from the air and put them into a form that hasn't got much meaning for other people, then when you actually start the planning for the REP03 you start with bits and pieces that don't actually make sense and the whole [module] is unpicked, turned upside down, it takes much longer and is unreliable and so I was very keen to actually try and turn the process round. So that little exercise actually showed us a lot of things that we could follow up"

"[The Business Appraisal and module specification] are very bitty forms, not coherent at all. It doesn't help pedagogic thinking [...] I think that is very frustrating and it's very frustrating for everybody concerned because it's restrictive to [the module team] to deal with because it doesn't help them, it's restricting for me because if I haven't been involved much with the teams I cannot see the pedagogic thinking behind it and so I often have to send them back, or I send quite a lot of comments to say "can you revise this, can you revise that because I can't see it from here""

Cecilia was very disappointed when the university decided to consider the business and production elements of the university's curriculum design process and the pedagogical elements separately in two projects (CBM and OULDI), and began a programme of faculty-led work with both projects to develop, pilot and embed a new faculty process that 'front-loads' learning design activity to before the Business Appraisal is conducted, thus enabling module teams to engage in meaningful and effective learning design activity, and meet production requirements and deadlines:

"Whatever happens I think it should be the two things together rather than [teams] doing some learning design and then having a [business and production] process parallel to it that is not closely related to it [...] From the very beginning, the intention was that you would be working together and then when it was split I decided that I didn't really want to do that so against perhaps what everybody else was doing, we decided that we were going to push it through"

Cecilia recognises that module teams across the university are under increasing pressure to develop higher quality student learning experiences within shorter timescales and with an eye to cost, and she sees these pressures acting unhelpfully on team practice. For example, progressively tighter production schedules put particular pressures on module teams to start writing materials before they have had an opportunity to think about how these materials will be used in the learning and teaching process. She believes that this has a significant impact on cost and efficiency and sees early learning design work as crucial to correcting this practice:

"Practice has been that people start writing without having any thinking about the design and suddenly you hear "Did you know they have just finished writing the first block" but how? If it hasn't been approved or anything? People just try to get ahead of things and that isn't always very productive".

Cecilia's expectation is that the new learning design led module production process will have a dual impact. Firstly it will enable more coherent and student-experience focused design and delivery practices, and will also make faculty processes more efficient:

"In terms of module team practice, [the aim] was to have the pedagogy driving the process not the 'bits and pieces' [texts, readers, videos etc] [...] At the moment – in many cases – [...] you have a module team chair that leads the module to production [...] and then somebody else takes over for the first year of presentation and that makes a complete division of the two parts of the life of something that should be integral from beginning to end because [otherwise] you don't know how students are experiencing the learning [...] From the point of view of the faculty it's to have a more efficient way of working"

Cecilia recognises that there are risks in embedding an approach which 'front-loads' learning design. In particular it might mean that time and resource spent on early learning design

activities might be wasted if a module is turned down at Business Appraisal, or otherwise withdrawn. She also recognises that if this approach is to work, then module teams will need to use the design activities in a highly productive and focused way:

"I think the much more real risk for me was what if this is not focused enough and people just talk and don't get down to earth"

Cecilia observed a learning design workshop being held in her faculty as part of the pilot of the new module production process. The module team were preparing for 'remaking' (updating and refreshing) an older module. The aim of the first workshop was to review the existing module using the OULDI tools and representations. She felt that the workshop was very effective in helping the module team identify areas of focus for the remake:

"I think something that happened at the very beginning that was very useful was looking at the previous module – I think that focused quite a lot of the thinking [...] for me it was quite enlightening to see everything that made up that module [...] I think that is a very, very useful exercise to focus the mind and getting [the module team] down to the real things that they have to think about. So, I felt "it's going to be ok". That was my worry that there might be too much talking and very little focus. Of course [the OULDI project officer] played a part in getting [the team] to focus but I think there were [activities] that happened to help that process happen organically".

She also felt that the size and mix of the participants in the workshop, which included the core module team as well as participants from most of the support units, worked well:

"There were so many people with difference types of stake in the process and that, in itself, helped them work well together in terms of "this is how we are going to do our thinking together and everyone can contribute with whatever their contribution's going to be". I think that was very successful. It's helpful to have people from different backgrounds, different strengths getting together to work something through [...]. I think the [learning design] process helped them work together because they were all looking at the same things. They were independent stakeholders in the same process with a common aim so I don't think that there was anything about people having different perspectives that they might want to defend and whatever with the rest of the group. I think they were quite open in their thinking and how they were going to look at ".

Cecilia recognises the role of the module team chair played in ensuring that the workshop worked effectively and she comments that it is difficult to fully understand what that impact might have been, however the skills of module team chairs are likely to significantly impact on the success of embedding this learning design approach across the faculty:

"Obviously [the module team chair] is a very good chair so that has helped – I was just thinking what would have happened if she hadn't been so good but I think it's just going to be one of those things that is very hard to evidence"

Cecilia recognises that the faculty still has work to do but is confident that they are on the right track. The next stage for her is writing up a progress report on the work to the faculty executive, she plans to continue to gather evidence of impact on practice, process and learner experience but recognises that more needs to be done in terms of ensuring full engagement across the faculty:

"We are going to be following it through but of course that will take some time before it's in place and we can actually see how its been for students but I think there has been much more thinking about the student and the learning experience"

"What I want is to reinforce the case that this thinking in front has got benefits both pedagogically and financially, and that at the end of it all the student experience [is better]. So yes, if I can prove that to the faculty then I feel there will be more motivation from everybody around the executive team to really embed this approach. I don't think its so much that they will follow it or not because I think that should be faculty policy - which it is kind of now- but I do find sometimes that it is difficult to reinforce"

Cecilia recognises that despite a general agreement across the faculty that taking a learning design approach is good practice, given the pressures they are under, many module teams still tend to default back to inefficient practices, in particular the practice of writing material before designing the learning. She recognises that she needs a mechanism for 'catching' and supporting module teams before they go down that route:

"Before I know it people have already started thinking along the old lines so what I actually need to work out is how we are going to do the right interventions at the right time [...] I have to be thinking about when the lifecycle review is due and actually say "so this happens next" so we can actually get them going and still [recently] this team [another module] has started to run before anything has happened in term of thinking and they are doing their thinking behind closed doors in terms of what content they want and so I want to get them out [from behind closed doors]! That's my challenge".

Additionally, there are significant variations in production schedules, budget, and module team availability and skills which impact on teams' ability to engage in early learning design workshops. So Cecilia and the faculty's Learning and Teaching Technologies Manager are developing a template to help module teams choose specific learning design tools and activities that are most likely to support the design work that they need to do within different design process constraints:

"The problem is that there are many cases when the process has to be compressed [and] we don't have time to do all the hand holding that happened with [the remake module] so we [are developing] a little template that says, "this is what you have to do" and then we actually go through the process "that you have to think about this, and then..." you know, so that even if it is not facilitated then the thinking is directed in a way that will get us to the outcomes that we want in a short period of time [...] I think the idea would be that every time a module comes for Business Appraisal we would have a discussion with the team"

"We will have to make it transferable but it will have to be different according to the team. So for instance [one team I know] is very good in learning design without specifically calling it that. They are very good, so with them I have to have a light touch because they have better ideas than any of us have - but there are other teams that are really hard work".

Cecilia recognises that the faculty will need to continue to develop the process iteratively and is aware that until the Stage gate review is completed there will continue to be a problematic tension between the Stage gate documents and the learning design process:

"I think that we need to go through another two or three exercises of this kind to actually see how we need to tweak the process and I do think that we need help from the university in terms of changing those processes that are getting in the way so that we have a better way of integrating the whole thing. The REPO3 form gets in the way of what we are trying to do. It runs against what we are trying to do [...] it would be useful to have some help from above to set up something that has pedagogy in mind"