

OULDI-JISC Project

Narrative 17

Alison Clark is the Module Team Chair for the remake of a level 3 module at her university. The aim of the remake is to refresh and update an existing module. The module in question - despite being 5 years old - is still popular and performing well, although students do complain that their workload seems very high. In her role of Module Team Chair, Alison is responsible for providing academic leadership to ensure the coherence, cohesion and quality of the learning experience, and setting and maintaining academic standards. Alison has been a member of a number of module teams but this was the first time she has chaired the process.

Alison took a very proactive role in developing the learning design process used by the team, and offered very clear leadership about how the design workshops would integrate with regular module team meetings. Alison co-designed the three half-day learning design workshops, and additionally met with the OULDI project officer prior to each workshop to update the representations (Module Map, Pedagogy Profile, Module Design Planner and a table version of the Learning Outcomes view) and gather data about the module which would inform the workshop activities. Overall, Alison has found that using the OULDI tools and approach has had a positive impact on the early design process:

“It’s certainly given me as module chair a great deal of confidence in that we are heading in the right direction with this because we have done the early thinking through [...] I think that anything that can tighten up the thinking about why we are producing what we are producing is a good thing and it is financially a good thing because it can speed up some of the other decisions [...] You actually come with a process whereby you can unpick the different components - and in our case of an existing module - to look at the different components and the relationship between the different components and review them in a systematic way. I think it would be much more haphazard if it was just the module team sitting round and looking at a pile of resources. So it's not only thinking it through, but it is then visual so it gives you a way of documenting what you've got and where you want to go”.

For Alison, the primary benefit of utilising the OULDI approach has been that it structured the process of reviewing the original module so that the team was able to make informed and purposeful decisions about its future development:

“The first thing that it’s done is formalised the importance of looking at what you already have – because this is a revision it’s made us look very systematically at the module aims (the learning aims) and the materials and using that as a starting point [...] and then coming up with the visual ways of looking at what you’ve got. To me that’s been one of the most helpful things – it’s giving a process for reviewing the existing material. Secondly it’s given us a set of questions to ask “well what do we want the revised or new module to do””

“You actually have an artefact at the end of the process or at the end of those early workshops [and] you can return back to them and say [...]”this is how the different components fit together in the existing module, and we can see what decisions the original team made, and this is how we want it to be and this is the thinking that we have done in terms of the new material””

Additionally, her experience working on other module teams has been that one of the particular challenges of the usual module design process is maintaining team focus and momentum over a period of time – *“holding the thread of those early ideas”*- and she feels that the archiving of the artefacts created by the learning design process, in a shared online workspace has helped with this:

“Alongside those early workshops it was important that we established the [Moodle] workspace where that information was stored. [...] It’s given us a way or recording what we have got in a way that can easily be returned to and I think in a protracted process that is very important – to have these milestones in terms of thinking”.

She thinks that being able to check decisions later in the process against early design thinking will make the process of learning design more efficient and effective, and that already she is seeing evidence of the impact of this in regular module team meetings:

“We did those workshops and the workshops then meant that the regular team meetings started from a different point. We didn’t have to go over some of that ground in subsequent team meetings [...] one of the difficulties I have witnessed in other modules is where the thinking hasn’t really be made explicit, so therefore you have to spend a lot of time checking what you all as a team think and where you are heading [...] whereas it feels like with the early thinking that has been done, we can make the subsequent learning decisions more quickly”.

The OULDI approach requires module teams to work together in new ways. Not only is the core module team convened earlier than usual, but the support units are brought into the design process earlier, and are encouraged to play an active role in making top-level/ structural design decisions. Alison recognises that this approach may well impact positively on the quality of the final module, but she stressed that, in a context where there were pre-existing tensions around roles in the production process, it was important to make the decision to design collaboratively explicit, and to identify the purpose of a collaborative approach. This would ensure that everyone in the team is clear about what was expected:

“To set up a system which is more about acknowledging different contributions actually goes against the reality of how it usually works [...] so I would say instead of assuming that this can bring different people together – and maybe it has – but in order for it to work well, it would need us to explicitly say “we are deliberately doing this [...] For this pedagogical purpose we want to look together at what this was trying to achieve and what we want to be different”. So maybe it’s about acknowledging that this is a shared enterprise”

“I think we have managed to do it in a way that’s taken (I hope, it will be interesting to see the feedback) a team approach. It’s been a team exercise so it’s not just been me in a corner sort of thinking it through”.

Alison has found that the learning design activities she engaged in prepared her and the Curriculum Manager well for the Business Appraisal, and quite well for the module specification documentation (called the REPO3). A document she describes as *“a nightmare”*:

“It felt like we started from a much stronger more informed point of view. So when we were being asked very, very detailed questions we had thought through most of those questions for that particular stage gate form [...] the level of question on that REPO3 was just ridiculous in relation to what we are asked to say that we are doing and it was less of a nightmare because we have been working with learning design. I mean, I really don't see how I could have done the REPO3 without it”.

However she found that the disconnection between the creative process of learning design, and the technical, business-driven questions about learning and teaching in the module specification document, highly problematic:

"I felt like [...] we'd been taking on this new way of working and we were finding it very creative, and then - whoomp! - we hit the system again where it wasn't asking these [design] questions and it was only seeing these questions as supplementary to a whole lot of other questions that we hadn't really thought through yet. I think that mismatch is still a problem [...] I keep using this word 'translation'. It seems to me that there are these points where you need to be able to translate the thinking that has happened in the learning design process into the [university] systems"

Additionally, she felt that there was a significant risk that early design thinking could be lost or not effectively utilised later in the process, particularly when the module team are under pressure to write materials to increasingly tight production deadlines:

"I think there's a danger that you do the thinking really early on and that is productive and then that thinking is not threaded through the future decisions and you go through [...] So, [...] as the pace increases, how can we keep that pedagogical focus there?"

In part, Alison thinks that both these issues could be alleviated by re-considering the timing of key learning design activities so that the translation of learning design outputs into the stage gate forms could be better supported at key points in the process. This appears to translate into more learning design interventions, rather than simply the reallocation of the three workshops:

"This pilot [...] has been really good in the early stages in terms of looking at what we've got and how we want things to be different, but it feels like it could have a contribution later on down the line when we are writing those online materials, at least in an initial workshop type idea which would kind of make us ask these questions, and find out what we don't know"

"I really do think [learning design] is a very constructive and important intervention in the production process but I think there probably needs to be some more thinking about the timing of those interventions. Certainly for me it raised this issue of [...], how you integrate early thinking into the next bit of bureaucracy"

Alison argues very strongly for ongoing support for pedagogical design through the module redesign process, not just at the beginning, by means of what she has begun to call a 'learning design mentor':

"I think the advantage of [taking a learning design approach] would be increased if there was a place on this module team for some of this input to continue. [...] It feels like you need a pedagogical jiminy-cricket who says "Oi! You said this when you were having those early workshops, and how does what you thought then inform the decision you are making now?""

"There are so many people that [...] seem to sit around that table [...] it's kind of weird but out of all the people I'd like to sit around the table, I'd like to have someone sitting round the table who actually has a pedagogical hat [...] It seems an important enough issue to be able to resource that through the process. I wouldn't see that as meaning attending every meeting [...] [but] it feels like the learning and teaching is such a crucial part of the process [...] I suppose that where I would like to end up as a result of this pilot is that we don't have something that just does a couple of workshops at the beginning but that actually there is a recognised need for some kind of pedagogical sounding board through the process".

Alison thinks it would be better if this role was performed by someone externally, for example from one of the support units, rather than from within the faculty:

"I think its better that someone is outside really. I think you could train up someone like myself who has been through it to do it with other modules but to me that seems like it wouldn't be as good as actually using someone [...] who has developed this way of working and can do it. [...] I think that would be second best because we come with experience of our own module but we wouldn't have much of an overview."

However, again she emphasises the need for sensitivity to, and awareness of, some of the cultural and role frictions between some academic and non-academic staff groups in relation to the production process:

"What we don't want to do is advocate another role that then ends up (which is maybe what I've done when I've said we need a learning design mentor) creating friction with existing parties but it's tricky because institutionally there is this friction between the academic teams and non-academics [...] that doesn't mean that [the learning mentor role] shouldn't be, but there would need to be some work done to make that positive, I think".