

OULDI-JISC Project

Narrative 25

Christina Randell is an education consultant working for SAIDE (South African Institute for Distance Education). She works primarily on course design and materials development. SAIDE is a facilitating organisation that works with course designers, materials developers and planners in education and training institutions in South and Southern Africa to help them design, re-design and evaluate their courses and learning materials. As part of the support for course design and redesign, SAIDE runs workshops for a range of target groups from different educational sectors, from Early Childhood to Higher Education.

Christina participated in a OULDI/Carpe Diem learning design workshop run from 19-30 March 2012. She worked with Sheila Drew, Greig Krull and Ephraim Mhlanga, representing the Supporting Distance Learners (SDL) course team. Initially SDL was not considered as a formal course, but a set of integrated learning resources that linked to a variety of practical activities developed using Gilly Salmon's 5-stage model (Salmon, 2004). The team wanted to put these resources online for people in other institutions to use and integrate them into their own programmes. During the workshop, Christina and her team were given the opportunity to explore a range of tools including the OULDI Course Features, Course Map, and Activity Profile, and the Carpe Diem Storyboard, OER Resource Audit and Development of E-tivity.

One of Christina's expectations for taking part in the workshop was to pinpoint what exactly and how they should refine the SDL course. Some of the fundamental questions that she wanted to address through the workshop include: Why do we need to redesign the course? What exactly do we want to refine? What are the features that have worked well and that we want to keep? Which features have not worked well and need to be changed? Which features are missing and need to be included? Who is this course for? What are the purpose and learning goals of this course? Christina summarised what she wanted to get out of the workshop as follows:

"Ultimately, it was to pinpoint those essential elements that needed to be changed and then come out with a clear understanding of how we could do this."

Christina felt that taking part in the workshop helped her review and address some of the key questions above. For example, doing the Course Features activity helped her team identify the key features that are important. Christina said:

"We went through all of them, and we threw out those we didn't think were important. And in doing that, we identified once again what we felt had to stay no matter how you change the course."

The Course Map tool enabled her team to focus on something they had never considered before, as Christina explained:

“Doing the Course Map forced us to look at the allocation of hours which we hadn’t done. We never looked at the course and said, ‘how many hours do we want the participants to complete this in?’... We realised immediately that in calculating the hours, that it will have an impact on what is possible and what is not possible. This tool was very useful and really helped us.”

The range of tools introduced during the workshop enabled Christina and her team to look at design from different perspectives. The Course Map tool in particular, enabled them to challenge their initial design of the SDL course. The team realized that there is a need to reconceptualise the course and create it as a short course rather than leave it as a set of separate learning resources. Christina summarised this change as follows:

“I think we made a big breakthrough. We have achieved the insight about the need to structure it as a course, an online course, and not just simply as a set of learning activities plus integrated resources.”

The Activity Profile and Storyboard were also found to be very useful by Christina, as she explained:

“I like the Activity Profile. I think the visual nature, you know, seeing the bar graphs, your initial ideas of the course, and the activities add up to the learning outcomes that you have envisaged. I thought that in particular, was something I found particularly interesting to use.”

“The Storyboard helped us to see the sequence into which everything fits.”

Overall, Christina enjoyed the creativity and simplicity of these tools which enabled her to look at course design in a way which is different from the traditional design where the starting point is always the learning outcome, as she put it:

“I think the visual nature of the tools and the quick and easy way that one could use it without too much elaborative training. They help stimulate us to look at the course in a different way, in a natural and creative way even if we didn’t see all the little links right upfront.”

“So what I like about this, it didn’t start with what are the outcomes. You came to it from a completely different angle. And because you did that, you had to ask yourself, ‘but what are our outcomes? Does this link up with our outcomes?’”

“And I like the way this was done in a much less rigorous and much more playful way, but as Grainne said, it looks deceptively simple, but actually it’s based on really deep research into underpinning, well-researched principles of design. That’s what I liked.”

Examples in Figure 1 and 2 below demonstrate the ways in which Christina and her team used the Course Features and Activity Profile tools to provide alternative representations of their course design.

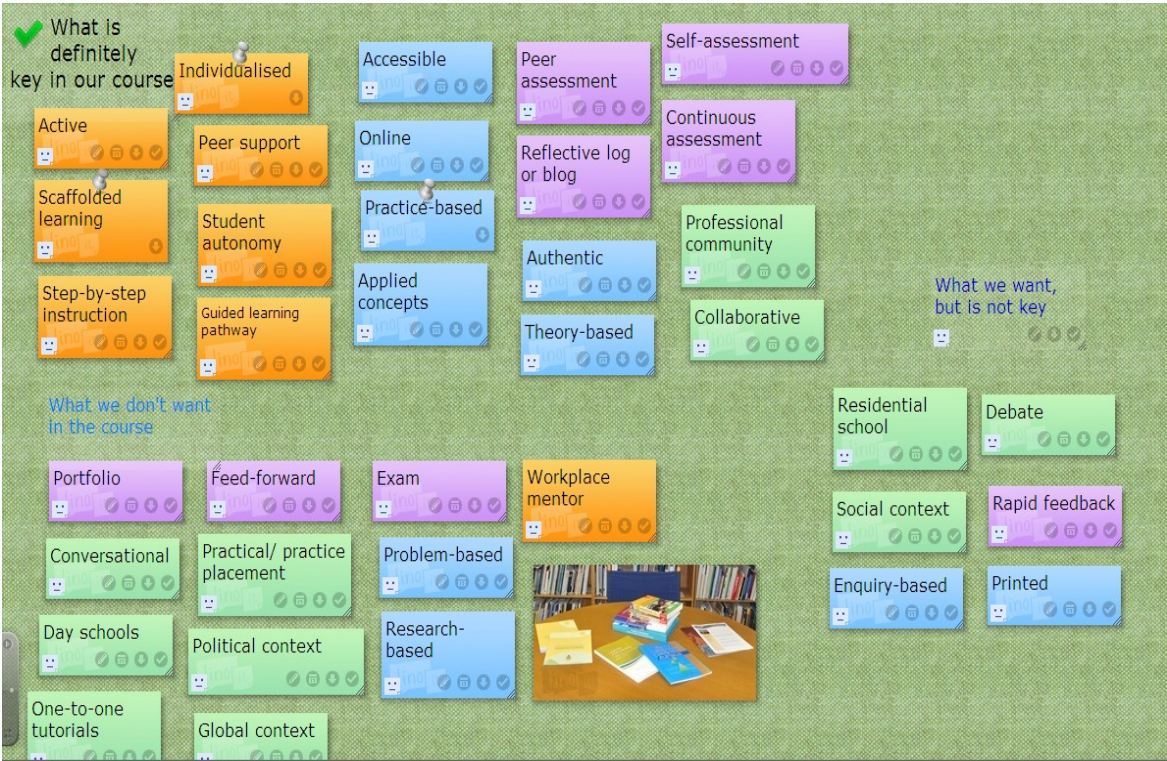


Figure 1: Course Features

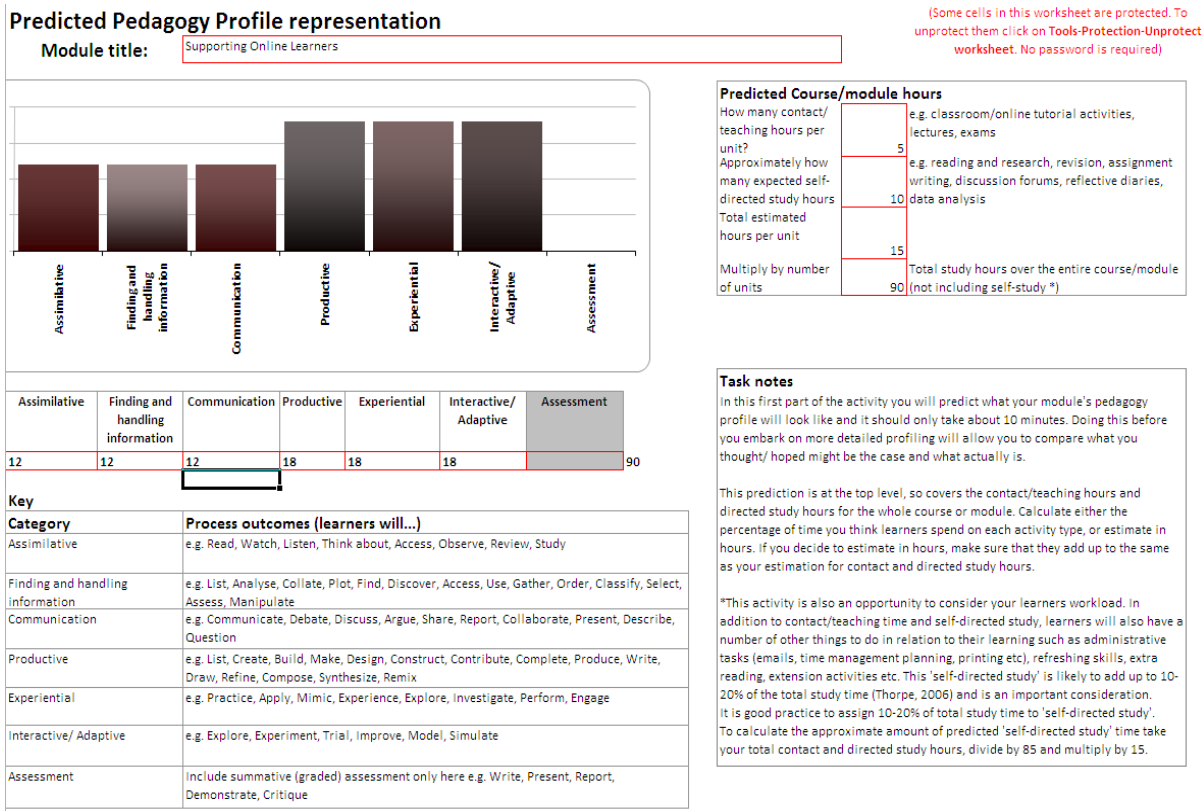


Figure 2: Activity Profile

Having worked for SAIDE as a consultant for 19 years, one thing that was highly appreciated by Christina was the introduction and access to a range of useful design tools and resources which she could take away and use in future workshops run by SAIDE, as she put it:

“I’m always looking for ways for designing things...I have found the introduction and access to a range of useful design resources really valuable!”

Another thing that Christina appreciated was that some of the tools and activities were in line with what SAIDE had been doing, and so she could apply them immediately to enhance her current practice, as she summarised:

“This is looking at tools that are different but there are also a lot of similarities feeding into what we have done over many years.”

For example, SAIDE has been using coloured cards (SAIDE cards) for planning courses at the early stages of course design for many years. Doing Course Features using Linoit stickies offers another tool and approach for doing the same activity.

Activity Profile is another tool that Christina could apply immediately for another course called Household Food Security (HFS). The HFS course is practice focused. There is no examination and using the portfolio is an essential assessment requirement. Christina planned to use the Activity Profile tool to ensure that there are enough portfolio and other types of activities in the course design.

Another tool Christina planned to use immediately after this workshop is the Storyboard. She is involved in another programme in which she needs to develop a series of critical skills tutorials. She uses PowerPoint to do the storyboard in the tutorial. Having used Linoit, Christina now thought that she could use the Linoit to develop the storyboard before the tutorial, and then to elaborate the storyboard further by using PowerPoint later on.

On the whole, Christina highly valued the opportunity to be introduced to a variety of different tools and explore the different ways of applying them to enhance her current practice. For her to take these tools forward, one of the challenges is how to apply them in the African context, as Christina stated:

“My work at SAIDE now goes back 19 years and in all that time, I have basically worked and developed my expertise in course design and material development in a range of settings in African situations which is very different from the First World situation. Usually we don’t have sufficient broadband, bandwidth or stable connectivity. You have to be much more innovative in the way that you use online tools.”

If the approaches and tools are to be fully embraced in the African context, there are some fundamental questions that have to be answered. For example, would this tool/approach be possible in African countries? How could you overcome the challenges? Christina felt that

they need to investigate the tools fully and be very innovative about how to implement them in African countries.

One thing that could help improve the delivery of the workshop as a whole in future is to give participants opportunities to speak and share their concerns and challenges in design, especially design for online in African contexts. She suggested:

“It’s important to understand the nature of the target group you’re working with, so ask people what their experience is with course design, especially what is your experience of doing online course design in an African setting.”

The combination of In-Session work (synchronous activities in Blackboard Collaborate) and Out-of-Session work (synchronous and asynchronous activities in face-to-face, Moodle and other tools) was highly appreciated by Christina, as she expressed:

“The synchronous is obviously a big motivating thread to us. Without the synchronous sessions people would not have achieved as much, I believe.”

“I became aware again that this way of interacting synchronously is a very important element in sustaining motivation and participation in a process like we have just gone through, especially a process where there is no assessment.”

“I thought working with the tools off-session collaboratively with the team was very important.”

One of the highlights for Christina about the synchronous sessions was getting inputs from the experts, as she put it:

“I think one of the biggest highlights for me was getting the input by Grainne. She has a way in which she communicates the information that is really useful. You gained a lot by listening to what she has to say. I really think that her input was, for me, one of the highlights.”

Christina offered a few suggestions on how to improve the Out-of-Session work in future. One of these suggestions is to encourage participants to post and discuss their ideas more in the discussion forum before they come to the live session. She gave an example: at one of the Collaborate sessions there was a discussion and debate on e-tivities, which Christina thought could have been done as an interesting discussion through the Moodle forum before the live session. She suggested:

“I think that in future maybe identify key elements that you want the participants to comment on in a forum before they come to the online session. That might help to stimulate some of the online sessions.”

Christina felt that working offline with the team is as important as working offline individually. It is important that in the future the workshop encourages more individual reflection and practice. She suggested:

“I think that it’s important to reflect continuously on the learning journey. I really tried very hard to post something every day. If you go to my journal, you’ll find I’ve got quite a lot of reflections there.”

Another suggestion is to have a pre-workshop activity either through Collaborate synchronously or asynchronously through Moodle, for the course team to fully specify what they want to get out from the workshop for redefining their course. A training session to get participants to know about the features of Blackboard Collaborate could be another pre-workshop activity. The facilitator offered an optional drop-in session before the workshop to the SAIDE participants this time. The drop-in session was attended by a few participants only. In future this could be run as a compulsory session to help the participants overcome technical frustrations.

On the whole Christina felt that attending the workshop was very useful and rewarding. She concluded as follows:

“For me this has been an enriching experience. I’ve really enjoyed it especially as I work for SAIDE on a consultancy basis. So for me this has been a really great way of continuously improving my own practice and making sure I’m in touch with what’s going on in other parts of the world. The inputs by the OU people and Leicester people have been absolutely fabulous! ... I’m really grateful for the opportunity of participating.”