

Dreams, hiccups and realities: What happens when lecturers and students co-design an online module?

Maria Northcote and Beverly Christian
School of Education, Faculty of Education, Business and Science
Avondale College of Higher Education

Negotiating curriculum design *with* students *for* students involves incorporating both the students' needs and the lecturers' requirements into the course structure, learning activities, resources and assessment tasks. In 2012, two lecturers and a group of first year undergraduate students worked together to design an online module within an on-campus course for a second year teacher education degree. During the semester when the online module was conducted, data were gathered from the lecturers and students in the course. Findings from analyses of these data are presented in this paper in terms of: 1) the lecturers' and students' initial dreams and plans when the online module was co-designed; 2) the hiccups and problems encountered during the online module; 3) the realities of the successful aspects of the online module; and 4) the lessons learned for future emergent and negotiated curriculum design practices in higher education contexts.

Keywords: emergent curriculum, negotiated online course design, students and staff as co-designers

Introduction: We had a dream

> "A dream you dream alone is only a dream. A dream you dream together is reality."
> — John Lennon

In 2012 we had a dream – to put into practice the practical and theoretical ideas of the emergent or negotiated curriculum (Garraway, 2010; Williams, Karousou, & Mackness, 2011). Coupled with the practicalities of one of the lecturers living overseas for six months while still teaching on-campus and online students, we ventured into a journey of negotiating and co-designing the structure and assessment tasks of an online module as part of an on-campus course with a group of first year undergraduate teacher education students.

Co-designing an online module about assessment and evaluation for teacher education students, within an on-campus professional experience course, provided an opportunity to respond to students' needs and learning preferences *before* the module was offered the following year. Although not a great deal is yet known about "how authority is negotiated in different classroom contexts, particularly in teacher education settings" (Brubaker, 2012, p. 159), some educators have incorporated the use of student expertise into their course design processes (Kiggins & Cambourne, 2007; Onwuegbuzie et al., 2012; Singham, 2005). By adopting this emergent curriculum design approach (Garraway, 2010; Williams, et al., 2011) students in the first year of their degree engaged in the process of designing the sequence and structure of the topics and assessment tasks of an eleven-topic online module in the year before the module was offered as part of their second year degree structure. Although the content and learning outcomes of the course were determined before the negotiation process began, the timing of this approach enabled the students and lecturers to work together on some aspects of the assessment tasks, including the marking rubric.

This paper outlines the design process and reflections on how the online module was perceived by staff and

students during the semester it was offered. Data were gathered from the lecturers and students in the course and analysed during the semester the online module was conducted by tracking regular email feedback, by content analysis of students' responses to open-ended questions about the online module and lecturers' reflection comments about students' experiences while the online module was being conducted.

Our journey into dreams, hiccups and realities

Our dreams: Co-designing

In 2012, the students and their lecturer adopted Biggs' principles of constructive alignment (2003) whereby the aims, learning outcomes, content, teaching methods, assessment and evaluation are all tightly aligned to provide a meaningful and transparent learning experience for students enrolled in the course. Biggs' principles were applied to ensure that the intended learning outcomes of the course were incorporated into all aspects of the module's design. As such the learning outcomes of the overall professional experience course were used to lead the design of the learning activities and assessment tasks that formed the basis of the online module.

By using Biggs' constructive alignment to provide an overall interlinked structure for the online module, Wiggins and McTighe's (1998) backwards design model of curriculum design was adopted as a guide to developing curriculum materials. Of the 42 students enrolled in the course in 2012, 9 of these (21%) volunteered to assist in developing the online module during the year before the module was delivered. The group who volunteered were a representative sample of the whole cohort in terms of gender and age. We began the planning process by developing an overview of the assessment tasks which the students would complete across an eight week period during the latter part of the regular thirteen week semester. Planning sessions took place during on-campus meetings and through online communication with students who volunteered to act as co-designers of this assessment module. The planning sessions occurred on three occasions in the semester of the previous year to the course being delivered. Students and lecturers met in agreed learning spaces to plan the online module. During these planning sessions, the course learning outcomes were analysed and discussed, assessment tasks were brainstormed and constructed, and the students' ideas about learning activities and resources were recorded against each of the learning outcomes. Some students found the process somewhat confronting, to be designing their own curriculum through a process of devolved authority (Singham, 2005), but they soon became more comfortable with the process, especially when they perceived that their suggestions were being implemented. Based on their experiences in the first year of their course, the students expressed preferences for assessment tasks at regular intervals, rather than a heavily weighted single assessment task. From these negotiated discussions and online collaborations, a set of assessment tasks was developed. As a result of the students' preferences and the requirements of the learning outcomes in the unit, the following assessment tasks were designed:

- **A rationale** for using assessment in the primary school; and
- **A series of short online quizzes** covering knowledge and skills developed during the online module.

The planning process developed into a series of three informal guided workshops which enabled the students to experience the practical applications of Biggs' and Wiggins and McTighe's theoretical models and principles. Once the assessment tasks were outlined, large pieces of poster paper were used by the lecturers and students who were to be involved in the course to draft out the design of the module, based on the non-negotiable learning outcomes from the course outline. These initial designs were then transferred to electronic documents which were circulated among the students for feedback and further suggestions. From these online and on-campus discussions, a common format was developed for each of the eleven topics of the online module which incorporated the following components:

- **Overview** of the topic including a topic summary, list of readings, assessment task reminders;
- **Introductory mini-lecture** in an mp4 movie format (including graphics, text and audio);
- **An independent online activity** which facilitated knowledge construction, skills practice, resource analysis and reflection, such as a webquest (Abbit & Ophus, 2008; Dodge, 1995, 2001), analysis of assessment examples, observing and analysing videos;
- **A collaborative online activity** which was e-moderated by lecturers (Salmon, 2011) in which students shared their knowledge developed throughout the topic, such as a forum, a collaborative quiz or a discussion of webquest findings; and
- **A revision checklist** that provided a self-check strategy to enable students to track their own learning.

As a result of the negotiated design which was contributed to by lecturers and students, the online module of this

professional practice unit replaced the two on-campus lectures that were presented each week in the fully on-campus version of the course. The topics remained the same in the previous and the current version of the course but the delivery method and the assessment tasks were more suited to the online learning environment.

Our hiccups: Technical and conceptual

A number of students experienced some problems with accessing online materials due to internet connection problems and institutional system problems which impacted on the reliable availability of online materials in the Learning Management System (Moodle).

> The least effective aspect would have to be the difficulty we often experience with accessing materials such as readings or lectures as they are all online and technology has a tendency to play up.
>
> The availability and compatibility of the lectures and readings on various computers was problematic. Often they wouldn't open or run.

Based on the low number of emails received pertaining to technology-related issues associated with accessing materials, it can be surmised that students generally were successful in accessing online materials.

In addition to comments about technical issues, the main area of dissatisfaction with the online module was conceptual; students did not necessarily understand or conceptualise how online learning could be facilitated when most of their learning experiences had been based on face-to-face classes throughout their higher education and previous secondary school experiences. Furthermore, our data analyses indicated that some of the students did not appear to be comfortable with the degrees of accountability and independence that were required and expected of them as part of the online activities and assessment tasks:

> I don't really like online lectures, I never focus properly and am not motivated. I prefer being in a classroom with a teacher.
>
> I find it difficult to take notes of my own accord, I would rather complete and submit certain tasks during the lecture itself.
>
> I feel as though I learn a lot more in face to face lecture and tutorial time for a subject like professional development, much more than I do online

Brubaker (2012) also found that, when attempting to involve students democratically in the shared responsibility of course creation and student-driven activities, students were sometimes reticent. Because they had more experience with teacher-focused, transmission-oriented instructional approaches and course materials (Singham, 2005), they were not always comfortable or willing to engage in learning situations in which teachers took a less authoritarian role.

Our realities: Format, flexibility and collaboration

Just over a third (14 of 39 students, 36%) of the students enrolled in the 2013 course responded to an online questionnaire which requested comments about their experiences of the online module. They mainly commented on the clarity of the format in which the online materials were presented:

> The instructions given are really clear …
>
> I like how everything has been set out - very easy to understand and clear instructions.
>
> I liked the format of the assessment module, how each step is clearly stated and labelled and a checklist is provided at the end.

The students also appreciated the flexibility of the online module as it "could be received at our own pace" and "paused when required and returned to at leisure". Students typically referred to the options they were given in relation to timeframes: "I like the online lectures and being able to do them when I have time".

As well as commenting on the functionality and organisation of the module, students expressed ideas about how

the online module and assessment tasks impacted on their learning:

> I really felt like I received a greater understanding due to the "Rationale" assessment task. There was quite a lot of detail required for this task therefore I was able to research concepts that were not made clear to me otherwise.
>
> The course is applicable and relevant to real teaching.
>
> The online lectures were very engaging and I learnt a lot despite not being in on-campus classes.

Towards the end of the online module, one of the lecturers who taught in the course summarised her observations of how the students perceived the online module:

> The results so far confirm what I have heard from the students. They are discovering that doing a module by distance puts them more in control of their learning and they are not sure they like having that responsibility. Also they are discovering it takes a lot more brain power than merely being present in a lecture.

The students' perceptions about how the lecturers worked together across the on-campus and online modules illustrated an understanding of how the "behind-the-scenes" planning of the unit was undertaken in a collaborative manner:

> You have both really put a lot of effort into doing these online modules, which I SUPER appreciate! I'm so glad that Avondale has tech savvy lecturers :)
>
> Thank you so much for all the effort you have put into collaborating and presenting these online lectures.

Conclusion: Our future dreams

Based on an analysis of our initial dreams, and some of our ensuing hiccups and realities, many lessons have been learned to take forward into our future dreams of co-designing online modules with students and staff.

In conclusion, some of our dreams were put into practice. Our students gained a greater awareness and appreciation of the process of curriculum planning and assessment design. We also experienced our fair share of hiccups – some expected and some not. However, all in all, the experience of co-designing an online course module *with* students, not just *for* students, culminated in a rich set of lessons learned by staff and students about course design, online relationships and the perceptions of online learning.

The main "hiccups" experienced were related to technical difficulties, misconceptions about online learning and students' preferences for a teacher-oriented learning context (Brubaker, 2012). Mostly, the technical difficulties can be overcome in future iterations of this course by some relatively straightforward modifications of the online materials and by streamlining some access options within our Learning Management System (Moodle) and e-reserve library resources.

One of the main benefits of this process that involved the co-design of on online module by a partnership between lecturers and students was that students were able to experience the intersection between theoretical ideas and practical strategies while they contributed to the design of a course in which they were enrolled. The "power" was shared between lecturers and students (Winograd, 2002). As a result of this process, students were able to take more ownership of the structure and design of their course as well as their own learning. We learned that students were not necessarily aware of the value or benefits of online education and that they needed more guidance than we provided to regulate their learning in order to engage in practices which enabled them to work as independent learners. Overall, implementing negotiated processes to develop a curriculum that reflected the needs and interests of both lecturers and students enables both groups to work together, towards a common set of learning and teaching goals. We plan to further refine the strategies we used in Semester 1, 2013 with our new cohort of first year students in Semester 2, 2013 to co-design selected components of our second year courses that will be offered in 2014.

References

Abbit, J., & Ophus, J. (2008). What we know about the Impacts of Web-Quests: A review of research. *AACE Journal, 16*(4), 441-456.

Biggs, J. (2003). *Teaching for quality learning at university* (2nd ed.). Berkshire: The Society for Research into Higher Education and Open University Press.

Brubaker, N. D. (2012). Negotiating authority through jointly constructing the course curriculum. *Teachers and Teaching: Theory and Practice, 18*(2), 159-180.

Dodge, B. (1995). WebQuests: A technique for internet-based learning. *Distance Educator, 1*(2), 10-13.

Dodge, B. (2001). Focus: Five rules for writing a great WebQuest. *Learning and Leading with Technology, 28*(8), 6-9.

Garraway, J. (2010). Knowledge boundaries and boundary-crossing in the design of work-responsive university curricula. *Teaching in Higher Education, 15*(2), 211-222.

Kiggins, J., & Cambourne, B. L. (2007). The knowledge building community program: A partnership for progress. In T. Townsend & R. Bates (Eds.), *Handbook of teacher education: Globalization, standards and professionalism in times of change* (pp. 365-380). The Netherlands: Springer.

Onwuegbuzie, A. J., Leech, N. L., Slate, J. R., Stark, M., Sharma, B., Frels, R., et al. (2012). An exemplar for teaching and learning qualitative research. *The Qualitative Report, 17*(1), 16-77.

Salmon, G. (2011). *E-moderating: The key to teaching and learning online* (3rd ed.). New York: Routledge.

Singham, M. (2005). Moving away from the authoritarian classroom. *Change, 37*(3), 50–57.

Wiggins, G., & McTighe, J. (1998). *Understanding by design*. San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass.

Williams, R., Karousou, R., & Mackness, J. (2011). Emergent learning and learning ecologies in Web 2.0. *The International Review of Research in Open and Distance Learning, 12*(3).

Winograd, K. (2002). The negotiative dimension of teaching: Teachers sharing power with the less powerful. *Teaching and Teacher Education, 18*(3), 343–362.

Authors' contact details: Maria Northcote, maria.northcote@avondale.edu.au
Beverly Christian, bev.christian@avondale.edu.au

Please cite as: Northcote, M., & Christian, B. (2013). Dreams, hiccups and realities: What happens when lecturers and students co-design an online module? In H. Carter, M. Gosper and J. Hedberg (Eds.), *Electric Dreams. Proceedings ascilite 2013 Sydney*. (pp.642-646)

Copyright © 2013 Maria Northcote and Beverly Christian.

The author(s) assign to ascilite and educational non-profit institutions, a non-exclusive licence to use this document for personal use and in courses of instruction, provided that the article is used in full and this copyright statement is reproduced. The author(s) also grant a non-exclusive licence to ascilite to publish this document on the ascilite web site and in other formats for the Proceedings ascilite Sydney 2013. Any other use is prohibited without the express permission of the author(s).