

Grounding Staff Development for Networked Learning Environments

Erica McAteer, Allison Littlejohn, Susi Peacock, Charles Juwah, Dennis Bates,

Stephen Bruce

University of Glasgow, University of Strathclyde, Queen Margaret University College,

Robert Gordon University, Napier University

e.mcateer@educ.gla.ac.uk

ABSTRACT

The presentation to the Networked Learning Conference session participants will describe some of the research, development and practice experience that underpinned the ScotCIT* ELICIT materials development, funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council (SHEFC) the rationale for its use in that development, and outcomes of expert practitioner review of some of the materials for networked learning contexts. It will also take forward models of development for flexible on-line courses which can adapt to a variety of contexts, customisable by the user communities concerned.

This paper backgrounds the conference presentation, supporting what we hope will be a framework for discussion and development with participants at the session. Its perspective is very much that of its first author, but with agreement and support from the other members of the project team. All of us feel that we should share the 'ELICIT' experience with the wider community as we work on future re-purposing and wider implementation of the resources.

Keywords

CMC; CAA; grounded guidelines; course development; on-line learning;

INTRODUCTION

ELICIT (Enabling Large-scale Institutional implementation of C&IT) was funded by the Scottish Higher Education Funding Council's ScotCIT programme. Five Higher Education Institutions provide the management group of the project, who collaborated on course design, authoring, development, implementation and evaluation of the materials.

As set out in the bid proposal and refined at the first management team meetings, the ELICIT project remit was to produce a set of tutorial modules for staff development of good pedagogical practice in the use of on-line learning resources. As production began, about a year into the project timetable, these were the module headings envisaged:

An introduction to using and integrating Communications and Information Technologies in teaching, learning and assessment

Using computer mediated conferencing in teaching, learning and assessment

Developing tutor skills for computer mediated conferencing

Using video conferencing in teaching, learning and assessment

Developing tutor skills for video conferencing

Developing computer aided assessment

Implementing computer aided assessment

Course development: rationale and vision

The pedagogical model upon which these modules were based represents our solution to what we perceived as a gap in provision. At the time there were several useful guides, tutorials and text-books on 'learning and teaching on-line' already available to the community, well based in practice experience and often indexing serious educational research. These types of resource are developing and extending currently, through JISC, LTSN and other initiative support. Many of us in the field of 'sound pedagogical development in the use of ICT' can vouch for these, as learners and as teachers. What we felt the sector needed was a flexible course which would be based in and developed from such resources, indexing them at relevant points and providing links to copy-right free materials that could be appropriated both for individual and group use. Our vision was that the pedagogical approach for the course should relate to accepted and tried theoretical frameworks for learning (McAteer et al 2002 this volume), its materials, tasks and resources should be relevant and its practice advice should adhere to the principle of *grounded guidelines* (Crook 2000).

The first module was intended as an introductory framework, indexing themes covered by the individual course modules. Authored toward the end of the course writing process, it would provide an alternation of concept issues and guidance toward initial approaches to developing ICT resources for learning and teaching in higher and further education courses. Whilst it would index examples of content provision as part of this, the emphasis would reflect that of the ELICIT programme, on 'supporting learning on-line' rather than on appropriation or creation and development of content for on-line delivery.

The six main modules were to form three pairs, each dealing with a key aspect of on-line learning support reflecting perceived user needs in Scottish higher education at the time of the ScotCIT call for bids: computer mediated conferencing, video-conferencing and computer assisted assessment. The introductory modules in each pair would introduce concepts, issues and concerns, examples illustrative of practice across a range of disciplines and set task exercises and (potentially assessable) course assignments which would generate and foster reflection on course content as applicable to individual learner contexts. The second module in each pair would be structured round individual learner projects, where individuals or groups of course participants would engage in actual development of learning resource practice incorporating the relevant technology(ies) into their own teaching. Theme papers would be provided for course seminars, the sequencing and frequency of these being a function of learner group context. Options for course resourcing and support would be suggested and discussed, but in general these 'independent project modules' would be loose bundles of materials and management guidelines for use by institutional support units. Whilst this did not exclude the appropriation and adaptation of module materials to serve within accredited programmes for HE and FE professional development or scholarship (or both of course), the main purpose for the ELICIT course development team was to provide staff development materials and resources, as required by the ScotCIT funding.

The range of pedagogical strategies anticipated for staff developer use included one-one and group project development via 'workplace learning'; on-line tasks and collaborative work with support via CMC itself; didactic and interactive seminar sessions; practice-and-play sessions involving relevant (learner-driven) use of educational technologies, group and individual tutorial support. The development of scholarship as well as practice in the field of on-line education was a learning outcome we felt should be an option for the whole programme. An important part of provision therefore involved relevant and appropriate research and practice literature to provide a range of theoretical 'readings' and case illustration for individual learners to access – independently or guided, according to motivation and need. The case illustration resources were in part derived from the JISC LNCS research, but also addressed rich and varied experiential accounts drawn by the ScotCIT OTiS work on VLS, and the ASTER project, led by the University of York.

The ELICIT course was intended to complement these, as an alternative or extension. The modules drew on output from research funded by the JISC under their 'networked learning' initiative, which itself was grounded by study of the research and practice literature, embracing a mixture of documented classroom interventions and empirical work, by field work involving study of learning environments resourced by conferencing technologies, interviews with students and with teaching staff across a range of UK higher education settings, and the collaboration of the research team each of whom are familiar with the use of such technologies for their own learning and teaching needs, in the analysis and interpretation of the project findings. The incorporation of this work into on-line introductory modules and frameworks for project-based modules for further development of skills in and understanding of networked learning was a natural next step.

Picking up on the earlier statement that "our vision was that the pedagogical approach for the course should relate to accepted and tried theoretical frameworks for group learning", the implication was that peer support would be given by course participants, the

staff development tutor and other relevant support staff. The same should apply for an 'expert guidance' component – in a mixed group of academic teachers working with learning technologists, higher/further education experts, IT/Network support staff and, of course, each other it was not sensible to distinguish 'expert' from 'peer'. Depending on immediate learning context, the role would switch across the whole group. So far as our adherence to the principle of *grounded guidelines* was concerned, we felt that the research and practice experience team members brought to bear upon the identification and review of external materials and the provision of our own should meet this. Moreover, our hope was that by embedding content within relevant tasks and reflective exercises which drew learners back into their own contexts of need as 'lens' for study, we were exemplifying the principle.

COURSE DEVELOPMENT: THE EXPERIENCE

Kaye (1993) states course development work as involving three stages:

an *initial* stage of goal definition and work planning

an *execution* stage during which work may be divided amongst individual team members, or small sub-groups, and carried out relatively independently (parallel partitioning)

an *integration* stage during which individual inputs are brought together to create the final product.

The first two of these we did, the last and critical stage was a hostage to delivery deadlines and pressure from the community, as well as fast-increasing and seriously demanding commitments and responsibilities prevailing for management team members.

There is also the aspect of actual production. As any academic knows (and as our students themselves demonstrate) writing takes time and good writing takes longer. We had not proposed ourselves as course authors, initially expecting to review, identify and approve the adoption of existing materials, within agreed templates to be managed by the project officer. We therefore did not buy out nearly enough of the required time. If we had it is unlikely that we would have been able to make that degree of personal commitment in the face of other critical roles we hold. Indeed, it is unlikely that funding would have been available for this. For the most part, therefore, work was done 'between times'. As much as was possible we worked in pairs, one member taking the lead and choice of lead author to module topic dependent upon assumed expertise, experience and possession of (our own or copy-right free) resources which could be brought in smoothly.

A really difficult aspect of this 'distributed development' is that one pair's perception of what is being written by another may not be an accurate reflection of what any individual member is actually writing. As Kaye (1993) points out, if this 'out-of-step' phenomenon occurs in a course development team on any major scale, serious problems arise at the final intergration stage of production.

In my own case, hindsight suggests that though the vision I held was common, its realisation through my module authoring was quite different to that (perfectly legitimately) realised by colleagues with theirs. This was less true for other partnerships but, nevertheless, once we got to the end of the road it was not possible to do more than acknowledge value in different 'voices' and hope that we would be able to identify time and space (and resources) within which to weave some common level of resource provision and rhetoric.

It is important to be clear here – all of us on the project team are experienced practitioners of staff development within higher education. We all 'specialise' in the use of information and communication technologies for teaching and learning. Some of us (this writer included) have long experience of both learning and teaching 'on-line'. The understanding we hold of the 'best ways' to encourage, resource, support and sustain academic colleagues in the use of such resources for their own learning is shared, that is we do have a common model and this model is based firmly in experience, but also in research.

Other common problems for course development teams indicated by Kaye do not apply, or apply differently, for us, as indicated below:

lack of consensus over the content and structure of the course which do not - or cannot - get resolved in the initial design phase, and which may result in major disagreements and needs for re-design at a later stage - *we did not perceive a lack of consensus at any stage in production...*

differing expectations held by different team members as to the precise scope and nature of other individuals' roles and tasks, and differences in the perceived trustworthiness of different colleagues – *here on both counts (particularly the latter!) we felt on safe ground.*

different working patterns (eg between team members who prefer to prepare their contributions in

advance of schedule, and others who delay task completion until the last minute) – *here there is a point to take up, but as each and all of us had to schedule course production work ‘in the spaces between’ our institutional commitments, it would have been hard to orchestrate a common schedule.*

There was a major plus-and-minus point to the ELICIT management team’s internal relationship – though I realize this might be specifically my own perception, I state it here. We understood, respected and made allowances for each other. We knew the common obstacles we faced, most of us came into the project from previous working relationships under a range of ICT funding initiatives over the past ten years and most of us had as a function of just those initiatives ‘gathered moss’ in the form of institutional and external roles and responsibilities across the sector which made heavy demands upon our time – and our intellectual capacities! No one of us, therefore, was going to exceed their ‘peer mentor’ role.

In these ways, then, the modules developed and were tested, by ourselves and then by peers outwith the management group. Feedback did inform change but (again hindsight would have been valuable here) feedback was elicited by *relevant experts* – ie by those of our colleagues who might be expected to make best review and developmental criticism of specific modules. This perpetuated the ‘distributed development’ model to the point of actual delivery. We need now to consider the original vision of appropriate provision, the pedagogical model for its realization and the actuality of the deliverable – as a whole – which has resulted. Taking lessons from experience for future enterprise (an unforeseen though predictable ‘deliverable’ of any such project work), we need also to take a measured look at what we have here in the ELICIT course and make best recourse to its satisfactory completion.

CONCLUSION

Feedback so far gathered through self-reflection, peer review and expert trial will be reported for discussion at the presentation itself. With one module dropped and a new title included as a function of perceived change in sector needs over the past year, we have the following modules with us for consideration by colleagues:

An introduction to using and integrating C&IT in teaching, learning and assessment (needing some editing, revision of images, direction of content toward main modules)

Using computer mediated conferencing in teaching, learning and assessment (needing two guideline texts, example links updated)

Developing tutor skills for computer mediated conferencing (incomplete, needing structure options)

Using video conferencing in teaching, learning and assessment (rudimentary cover)

Developing computer aided assessment

Implementing computer aided assessment (to be completed)

Using virtual learning environments in teaching, learning and assessment

Course authors of two of the modules (myself for ‘Introduction to CMC’ and Allison Littlejohn for ‘Introduction to ICT – an overview’) will be at the session and also providing hands-on exploration at our poster session.

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