DESIGN FOR E-LEARNING: INTERROGATING THE DECISIONS OF TUTORS-AS-COURSE-DESIGNERS

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This paper is situated in a UK Higher Education context in which e-learning has become a locus of developmental activity. Two Masters programmes within the School of Education at the University of Manchester, the MEd in English Language Teaching (ELT) and the MEd in Educational Technology and ELT, both aimed at practising teachers of English to speakers of other languages, have been available to both onsite and distance participants for over 15 years. During that time the programmes have naturally evolved in various ways, not least in terms of how they are delivered.

As in many institutions, the discourse of e-learning is clearly associated with technological drivers. As a group of educators involved in distance learning, we have embraced the potential of such drivers, but are interested in questioning how we are using them to enhance the learning experience, this being even more of a focal interest for us since one of our programmes reflects on the use of educational technologies.

The term tutor-as-course-designer embodies a multi-faceted role. We are responsible for the study of particular subject areas; we are involved in decisions about how we teach our subject matter both online and face-to-face and about the assembly of learning resources for that purpose; we have a certain design autonomy, whilst working within institutional boundaries that influence the structure of programmes and the technologies available to us; we have also developed to varying degrees the skills required to realise design decisions in online environments and we are responsible for the production of our materials.

The programmes for which we share responsibility are informed by understandings of language teacher development needs. The individual components of the programme also share certain characteristics, in turn informed by understandings about distance education and online learning, but equally they differ in areas that have intrigued us. We are, therefore, interested in exploring what drives the decisions we are taking as we make increasing use of e-learning potential. What are the different decisions we take as designers of the various modules that make up the programme? How do we arrive at the decisions we take.

Shared ground

The MEd programmes are structured around 6 taught modules and a dissertation. The participants, who may be native or non native speaker teachers, have a minimum of 3 years experience. Their teaching contexts are worldwide and immensely varied. These basic characteristics are significant in informing a shared ethos behind the programme. They come armed with knowledge of and experience in their contexts which form the basis of teacher learning as an interpretative process [1]. We share a recognition of 'the importance of reflection on and inquiry into those experiences as a mechanism for change in teachers' classroom practices as well as a forum for professional development over time' [2].

The contexts in which the distance learners study are, in turn, characterised by very personal situational factors which we know 'can facilitate or impede the process of adjusting to distance learning' [3]. These include social and family factors, life events and work commitments.

Added to this picture of our learners is the technology scenario, which is varied. As course designers who have clearly accepted e-learning potential within our institution, we use a range of artefacts to construct the learning experience: a web-based learning environment; onscreen, hyperlinked texts; document downloads in various formats; digitised videos for example of lectures or classroom scenarios; synchronous and asynchronous computer mediated communications tools. For many of our teachers, navigating these as part of a learning context is a new experience and not without challenges both practical and cognitive. White [3] talks of 'environmental restructuring' which learners need to carry out to prepare

for distance learning. In an e-learning context, technology set-up is central not only in terms of where and when access is possible, but also in terms of equipment and how it matches the technological sophistication of any delivery decisions by the institution. However, equally important is learner disposition towards technology and the mediating role it might play in their learning. Learners report varied preferences in this respect.

Finally, significant to an interrogation of course design decisions in this particular context is the fact that the potential for distance and onsite communities to be united through technological provision has also been considered. As Collis and Moonen [4] identify, the possibilities of sharing learning resources across dual mode programmes (face-to-face and distance), creating larger learning communities, widening access, achieving economies of scale have begun to influence provision in contexts traditionally described as face-to-face. Our programmes illustrate different decisions about dual mode learning communities.

A tale of two tutors and two modules

For this paper we focus on two of the modules, each of which is taught by one of the authors of this paper, Diane and Richard. Drawing on interviews between us and our e-learning support officer, we identify salient features of the modules through descriptive and conceptual accounts of each. We then consider how the foregrounding of specific influences on our thinking results in different approaches to course design. We each recount what emerges from this interrogative process in our own voice.

Diane: Computers, Language and Context

This module is concerned with the interplay between the three elements in its title, with a strong focus on technology in context. I aim not only to develop participants' knowledge of research and current issues of debate surrounding the impact of technology on learning contexts, but also an applied understanding of working within online learning environments. These aims are articulated specifically in relation to the changing roles of teachers and the technology-driven or -facilitated educational scenarios in which they increasingly find themselves. The following summarises the main features:

Instructional approach	Experiential learning; a social constructivist underpinning sees interaction with peers as an integral part of the learning experience.
Artefacts	Web based space; instructional text provides synthesis of the topic area; links to further resources, reading, video; tasks to support the construction of knowledge and provide opportunities for collaborative practice (reading, reflection, pair and groupwork, forum contributions)
Interaction	Forum provides space for task-oriented discussion and learner-initiated contributions; synchronous seminars timetabled for certain topics; strong expectation of participation though regular not required.
Time and pacing	Release of content paced according to a pre-determined schedule; distance timescale the same as onsite.
Community	Distance and onsite learners participate as one community; onsite learners become 'distance learners' so that they fully situate themselves in an online learning experience.

It is a module I conceptualise using terms such as 'experiential,' 'social constructivist,' and 'participatory'. Critical reflection is a key outcome and I see this as being achieved through a 'situated, online learning experience'. In explaining this, I refer to the notion of loop input, a technique in teacher development which Woodward [5], describes as 'an alignment of the process and content of learning,' in this case learning *about* online learning *through* online learning.

Furthermore, the belief that the module outcomes themselves relate to experiential learning extends to decisions about how the onsite learners also engage with the content. In this respect, the distance module has influenced the teaching of the onsite group. The two communities are united in all respects: as a single study group with a shared virtual study experience. This means that onsite learners 'become distance

learners' with no face-to-face sessions. Whilst recognizing some tensions in pursuing these lines, related to programme schedules and indeed onsite student expectations, my concern for a course design methodology that provides for a situated experience for learners drives the decisions in terms of approach and use of the online environment.

When talking about content design, the interplay between the online, instructional text and the types of task are central to my view of knowledge construction. These tasks variously encourage practical engagement with exemplars, targeted reading prompting critical reflection, reaction and discussion. The forum provides the platform for such discussion, sharing and 'externalisation of thinking'. Some synchronous activity is timetabled for the group and may be arranged by pairs or groups independently. Learners, therefore, need to not only be able to access resources online but also need to *be* online for a good deal of the module's activities. However, here again I relate these decisions to a belief that my participants learn *about* online learning *through* both positive and negative experiences. I recognise that peer interaction in the forum is not unproblematic. There are those who participate and those who do not. The act of forum contribution should itself be a focus of introspective analysis on behalf of the learners. It raises questions about participation, community building and learning, about the dilemmas faced by an online tutor in designing and managing such courses. I want the module to encourage this critical engagement with the potentials and challenges identified by research into online learning. I want to put my learners in a position to debate the same dilemmas that I myself identify in my own decision making as an online course designer and teacher.

I illustrate this through talking about various episodes in the module. Of the challenges of collaborative tasks, I noted in the interview that:

> if I have got somebody in Hong Kong, Mexico City, Manchester, wherever, and they are having to collaborate on a web page together, they've got to decide where to put it, the design, share content. They don't fully appreciate the demands of trying to get that going until they do it themselves. As they do it they fill in diaries, logging their own experiences of actually carrying these things out.

I believe the module processes should be open to critical analysis. Referring to a specific example of a synchronous seminar:

> [The learners'] observations were very interesting, they were about my struggle to actually keep the group in order, which is what I want them to do. Their analysis was actually of me, and what I had tried to do, and the effect of having 4 people one night, then 10 Wednesday, 6 or 7 on Thursday. That was perfect, they could actually see the challenges of synchronous communication of different sized groups, and what an on-line tutor has to do, to actually make sense of a seminar like that.

It is important to provide access to a range of online learning opportunities and to reflect on the challenges as well as potentials of using virtual spaces to achieve what they know works in their more familiar settings, what constraints might inform their own practice. Their assignment further links content and process, requiring a review of an area they have explored through their reading and discussions, and a critical analysis of the online learning experience supported by data from their diaries and communication logs.

The module is not without its design dilemmas. I identify one such dilemma which relates to the learners' situational factors', that is whether to provide for a learner-paced approach, providing optimum flexibility in terms of when learners access the content, or to impose the pace by making content available to the group according to a specific schedule. Researchers have identified various sides to this dilemma. Imposed pacing can impact on retention, provide for social integration and support, and facilitate a conversational approach to learning [6]. On the other hand, self pacing responds to the autonomy that distance learners often seek [7]. My own learners also identify needs for autonomy in determining how they plan and

manage their studies. This has resulted in a negotiation at certain points, with the content being 'released' to learners ahead of time to allow for personal pacing. Nevertheless, I still feel that a group pacing both facilitates 'timely' peer exchange, and provides the situated group experiences necessary for teachers to stand back and appraise for themselves how they feel about key aspects of online learning processes. However, the tension between this aspect of my thinking and the learner experience remains unresolved to a large extent.

Richard: Intercultural Communication for Language Teachers

In this module I aim to explore the interculturality of language teaching and the role of being a language teacher. The focus is on the development of an understanding of the intercultural aspects of language education, language teacher education, and the teaching of cultural studies and intercultural communication training. The module is concerned with appropriate methodology and aims to arm the teachers with the knowledge and skills to be able to reflect critically on issues of appropriacy in their contexts. It can be briefly described as follows:

Instructional approach	Resource-based learning; learners provided with pathways through the territory via a guiding instructional text which provides a 'tutor voice'; the routes followed are determined by participants.
Artefacts	Web based resource bank; downloadable documents; some video and print materials posted.
Interaction	Module forum as a learner space to enrich experience of working in an intercultural community if they wish to use it, but participation not a requirement.
Time and pacing	Materials provided at regular points for autonomous, self-paced access; distance timescale the same as onsite so that learners can appreciate the wider intercultural community.
Community	Distance and onsite learners access same web area; invited to participate in forum exchange though predominantly used by distance learners.

I characterise this as 'a very large territory', taking the students into many different disciplines including anthropology, sociology, and psychology' and I see my role as being to manage some of that territory, so that my students can make informed choices.

When talking about the module design, I talk of the module's 'ingredients' and describe it generally as 'resource-based learning'. These resources include a module web area, which I in turn describe as a 'module resource centre' with an assemblage of documents in html, WORD and pdf formats; links to electronic papers; bibliographies; links to a forum space. Some documents are photocopied and posted to distance learners where online access is not possible. I provide pathways or a 'map' through these various resources. This is also a dynamic space, with resources added in response to participant suggestions.

I place importance on demonstrating 'areas of commonality' between onsite and distance cohorts and the module brings the two communities together through access to its resources, both online and print, within the same overall timeframe of one semester. I see this as enabling me to 'bridge the boundary that might otherwise be seen to be in place between the different modes of study or the different locations of study'. The two groups are serviced by many of the same resources, many of the same processes:

> I try and get a parallelism, so I can say yes, this student has had an equivalent learning experience, using the same kind of resources. Accepting there are certain constraints on that, I want to see that they are both as rich as possible and one is not an improvised version of the other.

I am not only concerned for parallelism of experiences but also for equity in the way in which I provide for learners' own preferences for learning. I relate this to issues of appropriate methodology. For example:

> People can participate in all sorts of ways, it's not just by talking; the subject matter being about appropriate methodology logically would suggest that I want a learning experience which is

equally available to everybody. So their learning styles have to be accommodatable within that experience. So I don't insist all the on-site students talk, if they don't want to say things, I won't force them to say things. Equally if people don't want to participate in the forum, I won't force them.

Equity also relates to practical decisions about how I provide learning content for distance learners with diverse environmental situations. Learners must be able to access resources online but they are not required to *be* online for sustainable periods of time. They can engage with the content offline as they download, print, explore avenues independently. Documents created for onscreen access exploit the technology by linking to and helping to provide pathways through these various resources, and I describe these as allowing me to 'speak to the learners,' providing 'a commentary,' 'shaping their experience' in much the same way as the learning experience in my face-to-face classroom. It is with respect to these documents and my tutor voice that I refer to 'interactivity' and not the forum. This latter is a space which I acknowledge as potentially 'enriching the learning experience' but is not in my eyes the primary mode of interaction.

I am also conscious of potential challenges to the use of the forum and these relate again to my concern for equity. I am aware that the learners, who are not all interested in technological issues in their own right, may be inexperienced in and/or less disposed towards the use of such tools for learning. I know about some learner discomfort as courses have increasingly moved online. This has related to access, to understanding how tools work; to perceptions of the potential of such tools to add value to the experience, and to some learners' experience of forum communication as potentially intimidating.

Beyond seeing my role as one of 'managing the territory' for my learners; I respond to participants' interests and developing directions, reflected in the dynamic nature of the resource bank, through which I and participants continue to share what we find along the way. I also refer to myself as 'monitoring learning preferences' and am less comfortable with the term 'moderator' prevalent in much of the online learning literature [8]. Whilst I help learners to see the path through threads within the forum by weaving contributions as they emerge, I do not step in to require contributions. I talk of encouraging learners to come in by 'providing signals', but I recognise that not all will wish to participate; I am uncomfortable with any notions of prescriptiveness that are counter to the course culture and indeed to an interculturalist view of language teacher education.

Influences on course design decisions

There are various areas of decision making in the design of any course. In the descriptions of our two modules, there is evidence of a rationale for our decisions with respect to:

- the design and delivery of the assemblage of artefacts that provide the learning experience (resource bank, onscreen instructional text, media types, task types, communication tools);

- interactions during the module either between learner and content, or learners and peers and tutor as exemplified in task design, tutor voice and tutor role;

- threshholds of access to the online environment (do learners need to *access* online resources or do they need to both access and *be* online at specific moments?)

- decisions about timescale, pacing, scheduling of content (lockstep or self-paced)

- decisions about dual mode teaching (onsite and distance communities; related issues of scheduling)

As Collis and Moonen [4] suggest, these decisions may be situated on a cline of flexibility, involving greater or lesser learner autonomy or tutor direction. However, accepting these dimensions of choice, interrogation of our own design decisions illustrates how the choices we make are informed by a number of influences that relate to our thinking about appropriate learning experiences. The specific decisions, as exemplified in the two cases, are influenced by our:

- views of our participants as teachers and as distance learners;

- specific views of teacher education;

- beliefs about how learners engage with and acquire knowledge of their subject area;

- views of our roles as tutors mediating the learning experience;

- views of knowledge acquisition and participation, and how these relate to beliefs about learning;

- views of learner communities and what different communities gain from each other.

However, to provide a listing of individual factors alone is too simplistic a picture. For each module, there is a dynamic evident that sees us foregrounding the drivers behind the design of their modules in different ways. We both talk about similar areas of decision-making; we both refer to a shared understanding of teacher education; and yet we talk about and realise our modules in different ways.

Diane: My belief is that the outcomes of my module are intrinsically related to experiential processes, and the various design decisions I take aim to work in tandem to create that experience: immersion in a context that sees *all* learners as part of a distance community; a content design that exploits hypermedia potential to construct knowledge through guided exploration; tasks that see a locus of knowledge construction as being through reflection and discussion; a pacing that aims to support the dialogue associated with a community of learners exploring the area together.

Richard: My beliefs are focussed by a concern for appropriate methodology, in turn a central precept of intercultural awareness that I encourage through my module. My reaction against prescriptiveness both derives from this position and informs design decisions within my module. My decisions about providing flexible resources, signposting pathways through the territory I describe but not requiring a specific direction, pacing and my foregrounding of the individuality of the learning experience are all consistent, I hope, with my concerns for my learners as a diverse intercultural group.

Our interrogation of our approaches to the design of our modules has surfaced some personal realisations of beliefs about e-teaching and learning, of the specific influences that result in the modules we describe, of the impact of our decisions on the learning experience. They suggest that exploring how the interactions between these inform course design decisions in an online environment is an avenue for further research.

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