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Blended learning design: a shared experience

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Abstract

Five Flemish Higher Education Institutions developed an institution-transcending professionalization course, with focus on: learning design, for blended and multi-campus learning, in a Professional Learning Design Team (PLDT).

These elements are no common practice and therefore innovative within the context of Flemish higher education.

The course was first offered in Spring 2015, in an assignment-based and blended format. This allowed participants to personally experience these forms of instruction during their professionalization. At the same time, the course was an example of blended learning.

17 teams of 3-4 people started the course. 1 team dropped out. 8 teams offered blended learning during the 1st semester of this academic year. For 2 other teams all blended course materials are ready for the next semester. 1 Team had to shelve its plans because of other priorities. For 5 teams we are currently still missing the information.

The participants appreciated working in a PLD-team and the step-by-step assignment-based blended approach. The relative short time frame and regular supervision and intervision were determining factors for the successful completion of the process.

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1. Introduction

Every teacher tries to create quality learning material. Some do it systematically from a didactic framework or from existing material, others do it intuitively and artistically from an implicit beliefs-based approach (Conole & Witthaus, 2012). Consequently, development processes do not always follow the 'instruction manual' (Coun & Specht, 2008; Schlusmans, Koper & Giesbertz, 2004).

During quality assessment it is striking how much the quality of the learning material varies. Some professors are able to develop material in such a way that 'teaching in the strictest sense of the word' is no longer needed, because support, directions, assignments and tests are provided along with the content. Other courses are characterized by a summary of isolated learning contents. In this case, students are expected to be sufficiently creative to think of 'learning activities' to process the content. An education curriculum can therefore show a variety of different courses with a range of different technical and educational approaches. Literature (Abdous & He, 2008) is clear about the consequences of too little attention being paid to learning design: low quality instruction.

There is also a big variety as to when the learning material is ready for use. Some professors develop their material well before the course is offered. In other cases, lessons are prepared only the evening or even the night before. It goes without saying, that in this latter case there is little time for reflection.

In most of higher education (in Flanders) only students give feedback on the learning resources and lessons. And this is only done after the learning activity has been offered. This procedure is in sharp contrast with scientific research, where peer-review usually precedes publication.

In 'Designing with models', Van Den Boom (2011) describes how the learning design and development process is usually not well streamlined. The process is poorly standardized and too few guidelines are in place for quality assurance.

In Flemish higher education, teachers are often hired based on experience in the course of study they are going to teach. Therefore, the teacher's 'Content Knowledge' is usually fine. However, to create quality instruction, didactic and instructional technology skills are also vital. Unfortunately, these are not always sufficiently present.

Five Flemish higher education institutions collaborated to address the problems described above. Together they developed an institution-transcending professionalization course, which supports its staff in developing their didactic and instructional technology competences. This assignment-based and blended course, focusses on:

- learning design,
- for blended and / or multi-campus instruction,
- in a professional learning design team.

2. The 'Masterclass Professional Learning Design Teams'

To develop this professionalization course, a project was started: 'Masterclass Professional Learning Design Teams' (MC PLDT). The project went from 1 February 2014 to 1 February 2016. The 1st year of the project was used to develop the course and work on creating awareness on 'Learning Design', 'Professional Learning Design Teams' and 'Blended Learning'. During the 2nd year, focused on the implementation of the Masterclass, the evaluation and the sustainable implementation in the involved.

2.1 Masterclass development

The masterclass professionalizes teams of teachers, didactic staff and instructional technologists to become professional pioneers in blended and / or multi-campus learning.

2.1.1 Learning objectives

The participants:

- Collaborate in a multidisciplinary team. They review their own and each other's' didactic, professional and instructional-technology skills. The complementarity of everyone's skills is maximized in the collaboration.
- Apply the new knowledge and insights immediately, and systematically (re)design instruction for their teaching.
- Share their knowledge and experience within their own team, other teams and a broader network.
- Act as peer reviewers of a course or learning line designed by others.

2.1.2 Output

During the Masterclass, each team develops:

- a peer reviewed blueprint for their course or learning line;
- a part of the learning material;
- an action plan for further development, implementation and evaluation.

2.1.3 Content

In the MC PLDT, the creation of a blueprint for concrete (re)designing is central. Attention is paid to the total (re)designing process, the relations between the different phases of the designing process and how to approach this design process as a team.

Learning design is approached as a project and evidence-based practice, aiming at an interchange of the professionals' knowledge and experiences, scientific evidence, and information from the pragmatic reality of the participants.

Learning contents are always offered user-ready, and the ADDIE model for instructional design is used as a framework to provide structure to the contents. Collaborative learning in an PLDT is the core of the masterclass.

2.1.4 Organization

The program covers a period of 13 weeks and has a study load of ± 40 hours to process the learning content. Additionally, teams must provide time to work on the actual (re)designing of their own course.

Over the 13 weeks, 3 plenary contact moments are planned at central locations in Flanders, with all participants physically present:

- Start meeting in week 1
- Instructional technology training in week 6
- Closing day in week 13

In addition, there are tutor-sessions in which 3 teams work on tasks together with 1 tutor (=cluster team) and give feedback through intervision on each other's (intermediate) products. The cluster teams agree whether the guidance sessions is to be held face to face or at a distance over Skype / Adobe Connect. The number of guidance sessions decreases during the Masterclass.

2.1.5 Learning activities

The learning contents are developed in 6 learning tasks that are worked on for about 2 to 3 weeks. Based on the tasks, the participants process the learning contents and at the same time they work on (re)designing and developing their own course and material.

When the course was developed, the specific character of "learning from professionals" and 'teach as you preach' were taken into account. The learning activities and contents offered, aim at stimulating in-depth learning.

A variety of learning forms is offered. Within this variety a mix is made of individual - group, online - offline, synchronous and asynchronous activities. The variety of forms is offered to facilitate the learning process, but also as illustration and reflection material.

2.1.6 *Community of Learning*

A community-of-learning is applied as a didactic method to improve and deepen the participants' learning, both during and after the masterclass. There are three levels of cooperation:

- One's own PLDT;
- A cluster of ± 3 PLDTs, guided by the same tutor
- All PLDTs participating in the masterclass.

2.1.7 *Learning tools and media*

The entire program is offered in Toledo (the mutual Blackboard environment for all partners). The functionalities of this environment are utilized as much as possible. Where needed, hyperlinks were created to external tools, like Google Drive, AdobeConnect, Slideshare. This was embedded as much as possible.

This way the content is accessible in a simple way and only through one channel and participants are made more familiar with (the possibilities of) the Toledo environment.

2.1.8 *Learning design team*

The masterclass is designed and developed by a core team of 4 people, 2 of which were responsible for the content of MC PLDT and 2 for the project management. Key figures from all participating institutions supported the core team and gave feedback on intermediate products. These persons also guided the teams in their role as tutor.

2.1.9 *Evaluation and certification*

Rubrics were created to facilitate peer review of (intermediate) products. Teams who actively participate in the master call and who present their realizations during the closing day, receive a certificate of participation.

2.2 *Program evaluation*

A result obligation applied for the project: at least 9 teams of 3 people had to follow the program. An effort was made to raise widespread multimedia awareness from the departmental management, head of programs, teachers, didactic staff and instructional technologists. Two info-sessions were organized for potential participants, in which a choice could be made between physical presence and online participation.

This recruitment campaign was very successful. Within a few weeks, 18 teams registered. Since quality guidance could not be guaranteed for more teams, registrations was closed. One team withdrew before the start of the program.

17 teams of 3-4 people (n=67) started the course. 1 team dropped out. 8 teams offered their course in blended format during the 1st semester of this academic year (2016-2017). For 2 other teams all material are ready for the next semester. 1 Team had to put aside its blended learning plans, because of other priorities. For 5 teams information is still missing.

A quantitative evaluation (questionair) was performed right after the masterclass. Half a year after the closing, interviews were taken to assess the medium term effects. The participants appreciated working in a PLDT and the step-by-step assignment-based blended approach. This had already been indicated at the 1st questionair, but it seemed even stronger half a year after the ending of the masterclass. According to the participants, the relatively short time frame with tight deadlines and regular supervision and intervision under the guidance of competent tutors were determining factors for a successful completion of the process.

The masterclass was attended by participants from a teacher-education programs and participants from other programs. In general, participants from other programs were more positive than those from teacher-education programs. It is for the participants from teacher-education programs that we have not yet heard about their current status. It could be that our course is mainly suited for 'non-teacher-educator' participants.

2.3 Durable implementation within the participating institutions

A business plan was created during the project to promote durable implementation, consisting in this institution-transcending masterclass to be offered for 5 years. The program is created under Creative Commons and is open for all Dutch speaking higher education institutions.

The finishing touches are being made to the policy recommendations for the involved partners, based on the results of both the surveys and the experiences of the project group. Based on the positive experiences acquired during this project, the practice of an PLDT designing and developing blended and/or multi-campus learning should be facilitated by the institution's policy.

3. Conclusion

The masterclass Professional Learning Design Teams is an example of an institution-transcending approach for staff professionalization on learning innovation. Three learning innovations (Learning design, PLDT, Blended and/or multicampus instruction) were coupled and approved by the participants. With a relatively limited budget the institution-transcending approach brought together knowledge and skill and resulted in an appreciated professionalization course that can be offered for another 5 years.

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