

Week 1: Learners and learning environments

By the end of this week, you should be in a position to:

- share, discuss and summarise the issues which are important to online learners
- highlight and record some of the implications for designers
- to assess the value of a range of learning environments.

We start the course by thinking about the wide range of decisions that you will need to make in planning and preparing a course to run online, using learning design principles.

Already in the introduction to your course text, Sharpe and Beetham (p7) articulate the processes of design:

- Investigation
- Application
- Representation or modelling
- Iteration

These processes are cyclical and you may notice that we will be guiding you through the phases repeatedly in this course. The form of design we are concerned with here is learning activity design, and I suggest you start your study this week by reading the short chapter introducing and defining learning activity design, namely Chapter 2. In this chapter, Helen Beetham offers a diagram of a learning activity (Figure 2.1), which has four elements, each of which can be the focus of your design:

- Learner(s)
- Learning environment
- Learning outcomes
- Other(s)

Let us start our own journey together by thinking about our learners. As education professionals, you will know that learners vary enormously in their preferences and approaches to learning, their priorities at different times in their lives and their requirements for support. One of the challenges in preparing for online learning is in knowing how

learners differ and more importantly - which of these differences are important influences on their learning experience. Which of the many ways in which learners differ should course designers be aware of?

In Chapter 2, Beetham suggests that:

'depending on the task and context, it may be necessary to consider the following characteristics of learners:

- subject-specific experience, knowledge and competence;
- access needs, including any physical and sensory disabilities;
- motives for learning, and expectations of the learning situation;
- prior experience of learning, including the specific mode (e.g. online);
- preferred approaches to learning;
- social and interpersonal skills;
- confidence and competence in the use of ICT.'

(Rethinking Pedagogy for a Digital Age, p31)

As we work through this week's activities, you are encouraged to build your own such list of learner characteristics that are important for you to be aware of in your own context. We will ask questions about how much we know about our learners already, and how we might fill in gaps in our understanding. We use the concept of 'readiness' to give shape to our discussions.

1. Introduce yourself and your learners

(1 hour, probably split over a few days)

Your first task this week is to introduce yourself to the other members of the course. You will have already completed your 'profile' for the course last week, which previous groups have found serves as a useful record and reminder of the members of our group. The introductions this week are intended to help us find out not just who we all are, but in what contexts we teach and what kinds of learning we design.

Find the "Me and my learners" thread in the discussion forum in this week's section of the course site. As well as introducing yourself, tell us something about your learners.

Once you have posted your own introduction, read the postings from some of the other group members. Find one other person where you can see similarities between your learners and theirs and one other person where your learners are very different from theirs. Respond to their postings, highlighting the similarities and differences you have observed.

What do you notice about what people feel it is important to share about their learners?

Which of these learner characteristics are likely to be important to the online learning experience? You might like to make some notes in your learning log.

2. Course site visits

(1.5 hours)

The burgeoning of MOOCs (massive open online courses) in the past couple of years makes it possible for us to browse a range of online learning courses in order to get a feel for what current learning environments look like and how they might accommodate different types of learners. This initial exploration of other course sites will also be our first excursion into evaluation since we are inviting you to comment on the advantages and disadvantages of the design of these sites.

How might we evaluate an online learning course?

What we propose you do is to visit at least three courses from the list below and for each one complete the established evaluation instrument: Quality Matters Rubric Standards 2011-2013 http://www.qmprogram.org/files/QM_Standards_2011-2013.pdf. This rubric has emerged from well-documented research into the design of online learning, and is a quality instrument to assist in peer reviewing of online and blended learning sites. The rubric organises itself around 8 core standards. These standards are:

- Course Overview and Introduction
- Learning Objectives (Competencies)
- Assessment and Measurement
- Instructional Materials
- Learner Interaction and Engagement
- Course Technology
- Learner Support
- Accessibility.

Once you have completed the rubric for any given site, we would like you to reflect on the relative strengths and weaknesses of the site, and what you particularly find interesting in how it is organised or presented and contribute to the evaluation of the course on the wiki page [Course site visits](#).

A selection of open course sites

What follows are links to a range of examples course sites. The first few are from the Coursera initiative, which aims to offer courses to anyone, for free. You will need to register to access the course sites, but registration is free and open at the moment to the courses in the list below. You are also invited to propose and evaluate some example sites of your

OWN.

- **Design: Creation of Artifacts in Society**, University of Pennsylvania: <https://class.coursera.org/design-2012-001/class/index>
- **Modern and Contemporary American Poetry**, University of Pennsylvania: <https://class.coursera.org/modernpoetry/class/index>
- **Community Change in Public Health**, John Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health: <https://class.coursera.org/communitychange-2012-001/class/index>
- **Learning Space, Open University** has many online courses and units available, including **Pain and Aspirin**, 9 hours Introductory course, <http://openlearn.open.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=2684>
- **First Steps into Learning and Teaching**, Oxford Brookes University, <http://vle.openbrookes.net/course/view.php?id=5> (you will have to click 'login as a guest')
- **eLearning and Moodle Essentials +++Lite+++**, Barking Dagenham College: <http://coolcourses.moodle.org/course/view.php?id=20>
- **PHP/MySQL Course**, Long Beach City College: <http://coolcourses.moodle.org/course/view.php?id=22>

3. Are you ready?

(1.5 hours, probably split over a few days)

Learner readiness is one of the ways in which course designers have attempted to conceptualise some of the important ways in which learners differ. Some universities and colleges offer prospective and beginning students the opportunity to take a quiz to help them to self assess their 'readiness' to be an online student.

Take one or more of these quizzes now, thinking about yourself as an online learner about to embark in this short course:

- Penn State University, Pennsylvania, USA. You can read about the questionnaire design and take the test yourself at the Penn State Learning Design Community Hub: http://ets.tlt.psu.edu/learningdesign/assessment/onlinecontent/online_readiness
- Muskegon Community College, Michigan, USA: <http://www.muskegoncc.edu/pages/635.asp>
- School of Nursing, Indiana University: Readiness Index for Learning Online (RILO) <http://nursing.iupui.edu/students/rilo.shtml>

How do you think your results would compare to those of your learners you described in the 'Me and my learners' task above?

After you have looked at your results, go back and look at the survey tools themselves. Do

they ask the kinds of questions you would need to ask of your learners? How general or context-specific are these surveys? If you were designing such a survey for your students, what questions would you want to include? (If you are interested in the research literature on the design and use of such scales, there are some references listed at the end of this section.)

Post your thoughts in the 'Are you ready?' discussion forum and comment on the postings of at least two of your peers.

4. Week 1 Reflections

(1 hour)

This week we have discussed one aspect of designing for learning - our learners - and the ways in which our designs can be informed by an understanding of our learners' characteristics and readiness to study online. We have taken a tour of some existing course sites and considered how they match intended learners' needs. To consolidate your learning from this week's activities, we suggest you make some notes in your learning log and share extracts from your log in the Week 1 Reflections discussion forum.

As a starting point, try to list

- three things that you already know about your learners that influence your course design
- three things that you would like to know about your learners before you design your online course.

We have also asked you to jump back and forth between the roles of teacher and learner this week. We hope that noting down your thoughts and observations in your log will help you to see online course design from these multiple perspectives.

Key readings this week

(1 hour)

- **Course text:** Chapter 2, 'Approaches to learning activity design' by Helen Beetham
- **Course text:** Appendix 2, 'Learner differences and their implications for design'
- Greaves, N. (2008) Are your students ready to study in an online or blended learning environment? *Learning and Teaching in Action*, 7 (2) at <http://www.celt.mmu.ac.uk/ltia/issue16/greaves.php>

Background resources

(Not provided)

- Dray, B et al (2011) Developing an instrument to assess student readiness for online learning: a validation study. *Distance Education*, 32(1), 2011
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/01587919.2011.565496> [Free access]
This paper attempts to determine the effectiveness of online readiness quizzes, starts to unpack the notion of the digital divide and gives greater prominence to enjoyment and usage of technology over simple questions of access and familiarity.
- Pillay's RSRO Pillay, H., Irving, K. & Tones, M. (2007) Validation of the diagnostic tool for assessing Tertiary students' readiness for online learning, *Higher Education Research & Development*. Volume 26, Issue 2, 2007, 217 - 234.
<http://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/07294360701310821> [Not free access]
This paper reports on the continued development of the Tertiary students' readiness for online learning questionnaire (TSROL) which has four subscales: 'Technical skills', 'Computer self-efficacy', 'Learner preferences' and 'Attitudes towards computers'.
Such questionnaires are used to attempt to assess the relative influence of pre-determined, easy to measure factors (e.g. competence), on various learner outcomes (e.g. achievement, retention).
- There are alternative approaches to understanding learner readiness e.g. Valtonen et al., (2009) Finnish high school students' readiness to adopt online learning: Questioning the assumptions. *Computers & Education*, Volume 53, Issue 3, 742-748.
<http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/pii/S0360131509001067> [Not free access]
This mixed method study finds that for children with little or no prior experience of online learning, what continues to be important is their beliefs about learning online.

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