ascilite
ascilite 2012
FUTURE CHALLENGES | SUSTAINABLE FUTURES
25 - 28 November 2012 | Wellington | New Zealand

Future-Thinking Flexible Learning Development: A Design Approach for Sustainable Change

Claire Macken
Flexible and Online Learning Development Projects
La Trobe University

John Hannon
Curriculum, Teaching and Learning Centre
La Trobe University

Can you imagine the student's experience in higher education beyond 2020? How will teaching approaches have changed? How will learning technologies play a role in the 21st century student? In higher education, institutions will need to be future focused. So far, institutional change in the use of learning technologies has been dominated by an applied or pragmatic focus that persists despite the increase in uses of constructivist pedagogies and the potential of the read/write web, or Web 2.0. This paper proposes a new, future thinking and sustainable approach to flexible learning development. This approach engages with factors that are often ignored in applied design approaches to learning technologies, including the change management problems associated with introducing flexible learning into higher education institutions and conflicting institutional practices when using technology systems. The sustainable design approach proposed in this paper is referred to as 'FOLD': Flexible and Online Learning Development, as introduced at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia.

Keywords: flexible learning. sustainable, change, practice, design

Problems of Change Management when Introducing Flexible Learning

In higher education, institutional statements often present 'flexibility' as a unified, coherent entity. However, there are distinct institutional actors involved in its implementation through the organisation, and differences are likely to emerge in practice. Fragmented approaches to curriculum design can miss the opportunities provided by new practices in teaching and learning, as well as the learning opportunities offered through new technologies. The literature on learning technologies and institutional change offers many accounts of a persistent gap between institutional strategy and practice, and a history of costly and dubious outcomes (Russell, 2009; Gunn, 2010; Conole, 2010).

Collis and Moonen (2002) describe flexible learning as a "complex phenomenon" that is "expressed in terms of only four components: technology, pedagogy, implementation and institution" (p. 217). With the ubiquitous presence of learning technologies in universities, the term 'flexible learning' acts as a strategic descriptor that draws together different parts of the organisation that then take greater interest in the hitherto academic concerns of teaching and learning. In practice, these components offer disparate vocabularies and legacies and involve many different roles within an institution,. The consequent tensions can result in a discourse of flexibility and the application of learning technologies that fail to speak to pedagogical practices.

One approach to this structural complexity of flexible learning is an applied focus to flexible learning design. Applied design approaches, according to Bennett & Oliver (2011), tend to be limited to "practical, instrumental concerns" (p. 187), and they tend to confine their scope to local settings of curriculum, students, technologies and teaching staff. This pragmatic approach, or "use-inspired design research" (Reeves, Herrington & Oliver, 2005), the authors argue, tends to an uncritical process in which learning technologies are defined as a narrow field closed off from ideas and approaches from other disciplines.

This applied approach to flexible learning design is also problematic because it is not necessarily sustainable. The approach misses the broader factors shaping institutional flexible learning featured in educational research, such as "the economic concerns of government; second, the commercial interests of information technology vendors; and third, the managerial preoccupations of university administration" (Selwyn, 2007). Where technologies become a key part of learning, competing institutional practices come into play (Hannon, 2012), and a design that reflects a lack of alignment between learning goals and other institutional actors will be unable to put into place the conditions for sustainable use of learning technologies.

FOLD as a future thinking and sustainable approach to flexible learning development

This paper describes 'FOLD', an acronym for 'flexible and online learning development' in higher education, and a process for sustainable future-focused change management for flexible learning in the curriculum. FOLD has the purpose of designing or redesigning subjects or courses to include blended, online or flexible learning components of design. FOLD is currently being implemented for course and subject design at La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia. FOLD is a University-wide change management project with the key objectives of:

1. Developing and leading a University-wide project that designs or renews strategically important subjects and courses at La Trobe to include flexible, online and/or blended learning approaches.
2. Establishing policies and procedures that embed flexible, online and/or blended learning design in new and revised courses as part of course quality lifecycle review.
3. Providing expert advice and practical assistance at University, Faculty and School levels on flexible and online learning options, including a toolkit, guides, manuals, materials and professional development for academic staff.
4. Advising and informing University academic staff and managers on current research trends and best practice in flexible and online approaches, including learning futures, new delivery partnerships, models and technologies.

The FOLD delivery model envisions single subject design to full course redevelopment, partnering professional educational designers with academic content experts, involving both Central and Faculty teams, for a holistic and collaborative design approach harnessing different areas of expertise and support. Curriculum delivery designs include approaches for multi-campus flexible delivery strategy to ensure sustainability, equity and efficiency across the university campuses. The collaborative team for FOLD can consist of several, or all, of the following roles:

- Flexible learning facilitator / designer – expert in T+L to facilitate subject design
- Curriculum and academic developer
- Academic/s involved in subject teaching + Faculty T+L expertise
- Production and curriculum resource development adviser
- Technologies expertise– For example, Personal learning systems developer or virtual classroom expertise etc.
- Library and digital resources expertise – Faculty liaison librarian
- Language & learning expertise – Faculty academic, language and learning liaison
- Co-curricular and student engagement expertise– For example, work integrated learning, leadership programs, study abroad programs

Assembling sustainable practice

Each FOLD project through this approach exemplifies a program that emerged from a distinct set of negotiations and contingencies involving factors and participants that extended beyond the local teaching and learning setting. The outcome of the FOLD process did not result from the application of a forward-looking design process, but from intensive engagement with an existing state of affairs and a 'bottom up', 'top down' approach for the purpose of institutional engagement with flexible delivery design.

For example, one FOLD Project in 2012 was development of a resource for clinical educators' engaged by the University to supervise Physiotherapy students. The project commenced with two intensive workshops with the teaching team, and involved a number of design staff including LMS expertise, a graphic designer and library liaison. The process involved drawing together existing disaggregated practices and resources comprising *ad hoc* one to one arrangements, and establishing a central professional development website with guidelines and resources for clinical educators, that were aligned with program goals and external requirements. The effort involved in the project was distributed to the team for assembly and quality checking. The resulting "Clinical Educators' Resource Kit" is an instance of sustainable practice since it can be used by many participants, it contributes to a critical component of the program, and requires minimal maintenance to keep updated.

Figure 1: Sample FOLD project

For flexible learning projects to qualify as a 'FOLD project', they must be organised around the FOLD principles and process. This includes collaboration and ownership by discipline teams, alignment with strategic goals and support by Faculty, facilitation and support by curriculum and learning technology expertise. FOLD projects do not implement a pre-designed plan, rather, projects are fit for purpose, assembled to match discipline needs, with the available University resources. This approach, then, engages with the messy reality of specific issues facing a program or course - managing change by making connections, negotiating arrangements, organising places, times and resources. From this process, plans and designs emerge, but as an activity in response to the settings rather than a template to be applied.

Future-focused and sustainable flexible learning

The assembly approach to flexible learning design described above is to ensure that the FOLD process is sustainable and future-focused. FOLD brings a focus on spatial and temporal arrangements of teaching and learning practice. It attends to the embodied activity entailed in the arrangements of activities, actions, goals and practices that constitute processes such as "learning" and work.

This approach follows Stepanyan et al.'s (2009) practice-oriented definition of sustainable e-learning, framed within education values and oriented to practices with learning technologies. According to Stepanyan et al., sustainability is the property of e-learning practice that evidently addresses current educational needs and accommodates continuous adaptation to change, without outrunning its resource base or receding in effectiveness (p.10). FOLD adopts the notion that sustainable education is better able to bridge the gap between practices of teaching and learning and institutional strategies for change (Stepanyan et al. 2010; Gunn 2010). It is able to scope uses of learning technologies beyond simply local innovations (Gunn 2010), and offers an understanding of flexible learning in terms of teaching and learning practices rather than institutional directives. Hence, sustainability provides a more grounded basis for embedding a learning technology change process.

Conclusion

The notion of flexible education is "firmly entrenched" but a contested term in higher education (Tucker & Morris, 2012), that tends to be loosely defined, particularly in institutional policy statements, and generally

presented uncritically as an obvious solution to problems facing higher education (Bigum & Rowan 2004; Deakin University 2009, p. 12). Hence flexible learning tends to be tied uncritically to institutional operations, producing a top-down institutional flexible learning environment, resulting in poor take-up and transmissive pedagogical approaches.

This paper explains a future-thinking flexible learning development approach to address the critical need to engage with broader institutional factors shaping flexible learning. At La Trobe University, Victoria, Australia, FOLD is a flexible and online learning development approach to embed flexible learning in the curriculum. This holistic design approach focuses on the various aspects of the curriculum, including students, teaching staff, content, resources, technologies and learning activities. This 'assembly approach' to design organises the connections of networked learning, including Faculty goals, learning locations, schedules, technologies, external drivers of curriculum, such as professional bodies, viability, funding, politics, alliances. FOLD offers an example of a shift from the "ought" of plans & designs to the "doings" or enactments. Plans and designs, therefore, are considered as another activity (Suchman 2007). We argue that the FOLD demonstrates an approach to sustainable flexible learning that can disseminate across institutional disciplines and settings, and embed local, bottom-up practices that are capable of stabilising and persisting.

References

Bennett, S. & Oliver, M., (2011). Talking back to theory: the missed opportunities in learning technology research. *Research in Learning Technology*, 19(3), 179-189. http://www.researchinlearningtechnology.net/index.php/rlt/issue/view/1379

Bigum, C., & Rowan, L. (2004). Flexible Learning in Teacher Education: myths, muddles and models. *Asia Pacific Journal of teacher education*, 32(3), 213-226.

Collis, B., & Moonen, J. (2002). Flexible Learning in a Digital World. *Open Learning*, 17(3), 217-230.

Conole, G. (2010). Bridging the gap between policy and practice: a framework for technological intervention. *Journal of e-Learning and Knowledge Society-English Version*, 6(1).

Deakin University, (2009). *Perspectives on the Future of Flexible Education*. Institute of Teaching and Learning, Australia. Retrieved May 26 from www.deakin.edu.au/itl/assets/resources/persp-future-flexi-ed.pdf

Gunn, C. (2010). Sustainability factors for e- learning initiatives. *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology*, 18, 89-103.

Hannon, J. (2012). Incommensurate practices: Sociomaterial entanglements of learning technology implementation. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*. Early view. http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/j.1365-2729.2012.00480.x/abstract

Reeves, T., J. Herrington, and R. Oliver. 2005. Design research: A socially responsible approach to instructional technology research in higher education. *Journal of Computing in Higher Education* 16(2), 97–116

Russell, C. (2009). A systemic framework for managing e-learning adoption in campus universities: individual strategies in context. *ALT-J, Research in Learning Technology*, 17(1), 3-19.

Selwyn, N. (2007). The use of computer technology in university teaching and learning: a critical perspective. *Journal of Computer Assisted Learning*, 23, 83–94.

Stepanyan, K., Littlejohn, A., & Margaryan, A. (2010). Sustainable eLearning in a Changing Landscape: A Scoping Study (SeLScope: UK Higher Education Academy.

Suchman, L. A. (2007) *Human–Machine Reconfigurations: Plans and Situated Actions*, Cambridge, UK, Cambridge University Press.

Tucker, R., & Morris, G., (2012). By design: negotiating flexible learning in the built environment. *Research in Learning Technology*, 20: 14404 - DOI: 10.3402/rlt.v20i0/14404. http://www.researchinlearningtechnology.net/index.php/rlt/article/view/14404

Author contact details:

Claire Macken, c.macken@latrobe.edu.au
John Hannon, j.hannon@latrobe.edu.au

Please cite as: Macken, C., and Hannon, J., (2012) *Future-Thinking Flexible Learning Development: A Design Approach for Sustainable Change*. In M. Brown, M. Hartnett & T. Stewart (Eds.), Future challenges, sustainable futures. Proceedings ascilite Wellington 2012. (pp.587-591).