Expert interview: building technology into learning design

Peter Shukie, education studies course leader at University College Blackburn talked to us about his experience of building technology into the design of learning and assessment.

There's very little consistency about what we mean by learning design, about digital pedagogies, digital literacies or the concept of how people use it. We're no different to a university we're much smaller but in one building we've got courses in art, media, law, engineering, mathematics, coaching and mentoring, counselling. There's a massive number of different courses and in each one there's a nuanced way of how people are using technology.

[Ros Smith Interviewer]: OK so what sort of strategies have you employed to get round that?

The thing that we've decided on is we have to stress the pedagogical applications of technology. What I mean by that is rather than leading with technology, and talking about the latest trend or product or app or capability, it's about looking at what the purpose is for some technological innovation in a course.

The thing that is closest to my heart is education studies and a big focus of what we do with technology is ask students to use a critical approach to the choice of technology. So, we don't provide technologies and say this is good or bad; we ask students to provide scenarios whether it's community learning or primary school learning (or sometimes they do lead with the technology so people will look at games-based learning) but then rather than developing skills, they look at what are the issues relating to the use of technology in terms of cost and access, in terms of training for the staff to disseminate it and the training of the students to use it? So we've made a broader scope of what technology means in relation to pedagogy.

So, an iPad, for instance, is a gigantic machine. It's a tiny little piece of physical product but it's a gigantic machine in the number of things it can do. So rather than having staff deciding, you know, that using iPads is some kind of meaningful generic term, what you have to have is students looking at an iPad and then coming back with the ideas of how it can be used. There is a change around in what comes first. The purpose and the pedagogy and the context come first and the technology comes well down the line. Not necessarily second, maybe third maybe fourth but the technology becomes part of a holistic approach to some learning.
The approach about developing skills first has been tried and it's not had massive success. It's had some success and it's been small-scale and there are advocates and there are people who are really keen on things like Twitter that have developed from those small acorns. What we found though and what does work better is that if you start to engage people in discussion (so we do that with students in class and with projects and we do it in collaboration with other groups here) and if you start with the context first, people will teach themselves how to use technology because they have selected the technology.

Here's an example. In our interactive essay project, which we have had running for five years, it works in two parts that are different to a traditional essay. The first one is that they can use animation, they can use video, they can use any multimedia to create the essay so we encourage them to think differently about what the information is that they are writing about or they are thinking about and what ways may enhance presenting that information. It may be text isn't the way, it may be recording a voice-over on a film might be it but what we've never had to do on that first element is teach people how to make video or how to dot, dot, dot any of the technologies.

What we've done in terms of class is we'll have half the class or half the module based on content so theory or contention or policy, whatever that half is, but the second half are workshops where students have access to machinery (we use a MAC suite here but depending on different contexts it could be different things) where people play with different forms of technology. So they sort stuff out, they work between them, they choose different types, they make presentations to each other based on the content (so the first half of that module) but they do so using material that they found. So we've had people using Sway and eMaze and lots of different types of presentation software.

But all the time we haven't trained them they've trained themselves.