Expert interview: effective approaches to designing courses

Helen Beetham, consultant in higher education, talked to us about her views on the most effective approach to course design.

Doing it collaboratively, with a team, where what you're doing is surfacing each other's assumptions and sharing them so that, that very basic but really profound design, kind of meme, of a team sitting around having some physical objects, usually cards, on which some words are written which describe aspects of the curriculum, physically moving them around in a shared space, maybe putting them on a timeline and annotating them, picking them up and giving them to each other, that is really valuable. And tools we can use to do that more effectively, or to bring more information into that space perhaps, are inevitably going to be rich and they're going to build on existing practices. I mean I don't think we can expect teachers to suddenly gallop off and do that process completely differently. That's the process that works in my experience.

I think both in FE and HE that scenario I've just set up is then succeeded by another scenario which is a teacher, or a teaching team, in a situation with learners where they're having to make real that curriculum. So that curriculum that's been designed, which might be over a whole three-year course or it might be a two-year qualification or it might be a six-week kind of intervention - whatever it is they have to make that real don't they? I think that that's where we see teachers really latching on at the moment to things like Poll Everywhere and Mentimeter and all the things that allow you suddenly to make that situation much more fluid and dynamic and to respond much more in the moment to what learners are bringing: whatever their misconceptions are what their inspirations are.

So I think that's interesting because whereas the first scenario tends to perhaps fix a curriculum in a slightly different way, the second scenario tends to open it up to much more disruption from the moment to moment interactions with students who have digital devices in their hands. It's an interesting kind of two-way thing I think we're trying to do from the top-down process of curriculum design and ensuring that's very rigorous and very systematic and that it produces proven curricula that could be taken forward and most teachers' experience of technology in the classroom is actually that it's quite disruptive and quite fluid and if you're confident about that you can do really useful things with learners.
I would see that as part of learning design as well, that kind of ability to take a broad session plan or learning outcome for a session or activity plan and then be open to students producing different outcomes depending on the format and medium and platform they are happy with, so you're not completely in control of that. Students bringing different things in because you can use technology to break down the walls a little bit or to send them off on missions or to poll them. It kind of comes from both directions and I would call both of them learning design but they seem to be very, very different ways of looking at it and I think the second one is equally relevant to FE.

There are some profound implications for the macro level, which I prefer to think of at programme or qualification level, because I think that's the level at which we have a responsibility to develop a person and to give them a coherent experience. So I would see learning design at that level and then I think the building blocks of that, thanks to technology to some extent, can actually be quite a lot smaller - the tendency hugely is towards thinking at programme level now and not at module level isn't it? But I think that what people maybe haven't understood about that is that actually if you think at programme level you can break down the building blocks to disaggregate much more finely within that big programme. If you're using various technical ways of connecting up the learning experience coherently you could disaggregate down to a completely negotiated curriculum. The assessment regime could be the curriculum and within that you could construct teaching in a really responsive way, a really micro-way around the needs of individual learners which you might be doing in a kind of apprenticeship model. 'My need today is to understand this and I need a teacher to have a view of the big thing but actually to give me the tool I need to understand this right now.'

It seems to me that staff development is still really, really ad hoc and it doesn't seem to understand the relationship and that that relationship has changed because of what technology allows - the relationship between the macro and the micro. They could be much more open: the whole thing could be opened up much more with staff who are really confident.