

INTRODUCTION

Learning by Design

MARY KALANTZIS & BILL COPE

*College of Education, University of Illinois,
Urbana-Champaign, USA*

This special issue of *E-Learning and Digital Media* tells some of the story of the Learning by Design project, or at least a slice of the story thus far, because we regard Learning by Design very much to be a work in progress, an as yet unfinished story. Learning by Design is a dynamic intervention in a continuous state of recalibration, refinement and, at times, dramatic self-transformation.

The idea began in 2003, when we were wondering how the pedagogical ideas developed in the multiliteracies agenda (New London Group, 1996; Cope & Kalantzis, 2009) might be translated into the practical stuff of lesson planning and digital resource development by teachers.

This special issue includes a range of contributions describing the Learning by Design intervention, starting with the first phase of development in the mid 2000s. Anne Cloonan was one of the members of the very first group of teachers to work on Learning by Design. At the time, she was working for the Victorian Department of Education, in Melbourne, Australia, and she went on to develop her investigation of multimodalities in the early literacy classroom as a PhD and, most recently, a book (Cloonan, 2010) – some key aspects of which she describes in her article in this special issue. At about the same time, Mary Neville, then a literacy consultant in the Queensland Department of Education, in Brisbane, Australia, initiated a Learning by Design project amongst a group of teachers there, which she also describes in this issue, and at greater length in a book (Neville, 2008). Kathy Mills describes the work of one of the teachers in that first Queensland group in her article here, and also in a book (Mills, 2010).

In a second phase of the project, we received grant funding from the Australian Research Council (ARC) to investigate Learning by Design in practice. Rita van Haren, deputy principal in one of the clusters of schools involved in the project, writes about the experience of these schools in a relatively disadvantaged area of Canberra in the Australian Capital Territory. Peter Burrows and Leslie Morgan, who worked on the project, and Keiju Suominen, who undertook a PhD as part of a postgraduate award, provide snapshots of practice in these schools. Finally, Ambigapathy Pandian & Shanthi Balraj describe a parallel science literacy project in Malaysia.

In 2008, we commenced development of a second version of the software, this time completely online using the same web-publishing or ‘cloud-computing’ technologies used by Facebook and Twitter. This was gradually released to the schools which had been a part of the ARC project, and also trialed by teachers participating in our New Learning and New Literacies online Master’s degree at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign, USA.

Readers will discover in these articles vivid narratives of school experiences. Less obvious to readers, we are pleased to say, will be the digital media platforms we have been using – involving digital planning and resource development. Technology in learning should be an affordance, a silent enabler, no more. In the first phase and part of the second phase of the project, the technology consisted of two components. The first component was a Microsoft Word template into which macros had been inserted, which provided a toolbar or formatting palette for the

Learning by Design pedagogical scaffold. The second was a web-publishing space with both a collaborative view (a school, a project group) and a teacher portfolio view.

Our reasons for developing these technologies were multiple. One reason was simply to get teachers more comfortable with using new media in learning design and delivery. But the more important reason was to track the ways in which this change supported, or even at times spawned, transformative pedagogical effects (Kalantzis & Cope, 2008).

Several brief observations can be made about these effects. First, the fluidity and intrinsic iterability of digital media produce a new kind of learning documentation – not just a lesson plan and not just a curriculum resource, but a hybrid learning design planner in which the plan gets constantly revised and improved in the light of the teaching process; a dynamic resource for learners which embodies the evolving experience of the teacher as designer; and a place for professional reflection. Designing and delivering learning is simply not the same as it was before the teachers began to use the digital tool.

Second, without prompting, the very fact that learning designs are accessible through the Web, either in a shared invited view or a public view, suggests and supports a burgeoning range of teacher professional collaborations – shared ‘Learning Elements’ where one person writes a design which multiple teachers teach, each teacher contributing their best to the pool of available designs; a remarkable proportion of collaboratively designed and jointly authored Learning Elements; and people who take Learning Elements originally written by others and rewrite or adapt these with acknowledgement. If the traditional classroom was a place where the teacher shut the door and did their own thing, web sharing supports an environment brimming with professional pedagogical conversations and collaborative development of a pedagogical knowledge bank.

Third, the fact that students can access the ‘learner resource’ side of the Learning Element gives them the autonomy to work in groups or work at their own pace, or to undertake activities that suit their interests and needs. Making this available online, in other words, allows for more sensitively and effectively differentiated instruction. It also allows parents to see the work plans and task descriptions of the work their children are undertaking.

We are now very fortunate to be moving into a third major iteration of the project and a new phase of technology development, having received a grant from the Institute of Educational Sciences, US Department of Education for 2010 to 2012 to develop and trial an online student workspace to complement the current teacher-authored ‘teacher resource’ and ‘learner resource’ spaces.

Learning by Design is not simply an exercise in applying the new digital media to learning, as important as that may in fact be in this moment of transformation in our media of communication and sociability. It is more fundamentally an attempt to create social relations of learning and collaborative relations of pedagogical design appropriate to what Gunther Kress (2003) calls our ‘new media age’.

References

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