

ABC Learning Design Life Hacks

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Abstract

The ABC Learning Design methodology pioneered by Clive Young and Nataša Perović continues to grow in popularity worldwide as described at <https://abc-ld.org/>. Rooted in Diana Laurillard's Conversational Framework (2012), the method provides an accessible, high-energy curriculum development workshop where participants work intensively in teams to design or redesign modules and/or programmes. Through a combination of cards, structured activities, discussions and debates, participants leave the workshop with a storyboard outlining the intended student learning experience they wish to create. Participants also develop their awareness of potential digital technologies and are frequently provided with follow-up supports to help make their designs a reality. However there are times when it isn't possible to run the ABC workshop exactly as prescribed and it becomes necessary to 'hack' the format to suit particular environments and situations. This paper describes three scenarios where this occurred and outlines how the classic ABC method was adapted to suit specific circumstances and individuals. The content may therefore be of interest to academic/educational developers interested in exploring a learning design framework that can potentially be applied to a broad variety of contexts.

Keywords

ABC, learning design, curriculum design, life hacks, framework, professional development, professional learning

1. Introduction and Motivation

A 90 minute or 2 hour ABC workshop typically involves a consistent sequence of activities including:

- Introductory presentation to set the scene for participants
- ‘Tweet’ exercise to help distil the core purpose or essence of the course
- Blended graph activity to identify initial expectations regarding blended vs online elements
- Storyboarding activity using six ‘Learning Types’ cards to map out the intended student learning experience
- Assessment activity to illustrate formative and summative assessment points
- Action plan to identify next steps such as further follow up technology support

But what happens when circumstances dictate that it is not possible to run the full ‘classic’ workshop under ideal conditions? This may be when the room is simply not suitable for round-table discussion, when the team involved needs something more bespoke and focused than the standard format, or when there are very specific time limitations and dependencies outside the facilitator’s control. This paper describes three such scenarios and how the traditional ABC method can respond and adapt to meet sometimes less conventional, less ‘perfect’ situations.

2. The Computer Lab Experience

In February 2018, one of the authors of this paper was invited to lecture HR/learning development professionals on the topic of designing blended learning. For their final assessment, these part-time students were asked to work in pairs to design a blended learning solution for their company/organisation. The use of ABC seemed like a natural fit in this context both as a framework for the teams to work together on their designs and as a means of educating students on potential technologies to be included in the mix. Rather than simply directing them towards multiple lists of technologies, the author (who was also the lecturer in this case) felt that it might work better to highlight potential technologies using the pedagogically driven structure that ABC provides.

There were approximately 40 students in the class and there were a number of challenges to consider: the students were seated in front of computers in the horizontal rows of a typical computer lab and there was simply no physical space to gather around a table to engage with the typical ABC activities. There was no way to use the standard large poster for storyboarding, for example. Also, the students were asked to work in teams of two per for the assessment so a pair-oriented team configuration (versus 4-5 to a table) was needed here. Finally, the ABC workshop was only one aspect of the timetable for the day and there was not enough time to run the full workshop in this context, bearing in mind other cognitive demands and requirements.

As a result of the above, the ABC activities were pared back to focus on the ‘Tweet’ and Storyboarding exercises, and some pragmatic decisions were made on how to approach these two elements. The first significant format hack that was made related to the Tweet stage: instead of using the standard one-page Tweet handout, with the sample Twitter-like box, students were instructed to use their phones or computers to participate in a Zeetings activity. Zeetings is an audience engagement tool that allows participants in a meeting or classroom to actively interact with a presentation in a variety of ways, e.g. by responding to polls, posting comments, taking notes and more. In this case, a Zeetings activity was set up by the lecturer in advance and students were invited to “Share a one-sentence ‘Tweet’ that describes your intended solution. Keep it simple and catchy!” The tweets created by students displayed in a dynamic feed and as a result students were able to see the efforts of the entire class displayed on screen. This led to much discussion and buzz in the room with students obviously making serious efforts to produce playful yet purposeful ‘tweets’.

The second format hack involved an alternative take on the storyboarding exercise: instead of gathering around the standard A1 poster, students were asked to go on a learning types ‘Walk Through’. This involved the lecturer briefly presenting each learning type after which the students worked in pairs to discuss it and the technologies/ideas presented. Each learning type ‘card’ was presented one by one via Google Slides and students were given time after each card was shown to discuss. Again, this activity worked surprisingly well with students commenting on the useful framework that the format provided. It was also very interesting for the author to observe this slower approach to explaining each of the learning types and the valuable

space this particular hack provided for peer-to-peer discussion. Students subsequently recorded short videos about their design plans and shared them with each other via the Fliggrid video sharing tool.

3. The Solution-focused Experience

The Masters in Special Educational Needs (MSEN) is a two-year blended programme for qualified and experienced teachers working in primary and post-primary schools, in special schools or classes and other recognised educational centres. One pathway through the MSEN is available only for participants who have completed the Professional Diploma in Special and Inclusive Education. These participants must complete three modules delivered entirely online through the virtual learning platform, Loop (Moodle) over a one-year timeframe before moving into year two. In conversations with the programme chair, one of the authors of this paper became aware of some challenges around the delivery of these online modules. The central challenge was articulated as a need to refresh the online pedagogical approaches which were in place for a number of years. The ABC Learning Design workshop was recommended as an opportunity to support this re-design process.

The programme chair had already identified the challenge to be addressed in the re-design of these modules, therefore this particular ABC workshop aimed to be more solution-focused than the traditional ABC approach. On further discussion, the central focus for the group was to re-design online content which related largely to the 'Acquisition' learning type within the ABC Learning Design framework. The content delivery for the online modules had not evolved to a great extent over time. Conversely the technologies and tools available for this learning type had significantly expanded and developed during this period and the programme chair was eager to engage with some of these new technologies. Given this clear focus, the workshop team felt that an additional support which related specifically to tools for online teaching, learning and assessment could be useful in this context.

The 3E Framework has been developed by Napier University to support staff with the practical implementation of technology-enhanced learning and has been used by institutions across the UK and beyond (Smyth, 2012). One adaptation of the 3E

framework developed by York St. John University is a matrix which offers guidance for staff in using Moodle tools along a continuum from novice user to expert (TEL@YSJ, 2015). In this case, a stripped back version of this matrix was used to scaffold a discussion with the MSEN programme team with the aim of introducing them to alternative content creation tools that had become available since the initial days of this programme. This exercise was completed *before* engaging with the learning type cards which allowed the group to connect the functionality of the newly available tools with the ‘Acquisition’ learning type card during that process. The introduction of the new tools also supported the engagement of the team in the action plan process, with some additional training on some of the tools (including H5P) as a natural next step. The programme team welcomed the opportunity to work collaboratively with each other supported by the authors to systematically review approaches to the delivery of learning content.

4. The New Tutor/Demonstrator Experience

The final hack of this paper will briefly describe how ABC was used within an accredited module for new tutors/demonstrators to introduce them to the concepts of learning design. In this case, the overall title of the session was an ‘Introduction to Learning Design’ and it began with some discussion about constructive alignment followed by a short Persona development exercise. Instead of the standard ABC introductory presentation, a much shorter version was created to briefly explain what ABC is, describe the learning types cards, and outline the storyboarding process.

Much of the focus of the session was on the storyboarding stage. What made this experience a little different was that participants were given a set topic called ‘Finding Relevant Literature’ to design a course on. That particular topic was chosen because of the short timeframe as it was agreed between module co-ordinator and the ABC facilitator that sufficient time was not available for discussion/selection of a topic that would be agreeable to all. Literature searching was thought to be a topic that all of those present would be familiar with and could engage with in some way. Although arguably less empowering, this approach seemed to work well and in-class feedback on the method mentioned its “collaborative”, “human touch” and “systematic”

benefits. The students did not seem to object to being given a specific course to design this case.

5. Conclusions and Future Work

ABC is a popular learning design framework that is clearly adaptable enough to work in a variety of contexts. It is currently the focus of an Erasmus+ funded ‘ABC to VLE’ project that aims to advance implementation of this innovative and engaging approach. As one of the 12 partner universities in this project, we have already contributed localised versions of the materials, case studies, and interactive digital tools to progress use of ABC. Further outputs and evaluations will be released over 2020, as the second phase of this project draws to a close.

The authors of this paper have also established a special interest group for those interested in comparing notes about ABC (see <https://abc-ld.org/groups/abc-swap-shop/>). The ABC Swap Shop is a webinar series and community for educators in Ireland willing to share and discuss institution-specific experiences of the ABC Learning Design methodology. It is our expectation that more ABC-related hacks and adaptations will be uncovered during these practice-sharing sessions which may form the basis of future publications.

References

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