

## 2019 European Learning & Teaching Forum

### Towards successful learning: Controversies and common ground

Organised by EUA and hosted by the University of Warsaw

14-15 February 2019

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Bernold Hasenknopf is a chemistry professor since 1997 at Sorbonne University (formerly UPMC) in Paris, France. As a teacher, he always engaged in innovative teaching. He took up responsibilities as coordinator of inorganic chemistry, then for the molecular chemistry branch of the Master studies, vice-director of the Master of chemistry, dean of studies of the department of chemistry and now director of the Master of chemistry. He was member of the advisory board for the vice-president of teaching and learning, and of the pilot team for innovative teaching at his university. Currently, he is a member of the Academic Council, and board member of the educational support center Capsule in his university, where he is in charge of the coordination of the training programme for academic development.

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Vassiliki Michou is a Research engineer (Ph.D.) at the Centre of Pedagogical support and Innovation (CAPSULE) at Sorbonne University (formerly UPMC). She works as project manager (IDEX SUPER projects : FEL'1 (realisation of 9 SPOCs) / IMAP project - creation of an interdisciplinary master level course combining sciences and humanities / Play@SU project - building a platform for serious games on physics) instructional designer and trainer (at Sorbonne Université, for a French national association and for the Erasmus+ projects MarMOOC and ABC to VLE). Currently she manages several projects including the Short Virtual Exchange project (S-VIP) that offers to students at international level a

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Manuela Milani is currently the Exel project manager. Exel is the new initiative in UNIMI aimed at innovating teaching and learning practices. She has more than 20 years of distance and online education experience in different roles: previously, she was an online facilitator, instructional technology specialist, learning technology coordinator, and transnational European projects local coordinator. In recent years she delivered many training and professional development activities for university staff and faculty members. Her research aims are exploring the impact of cultural differences on the design of online courses offered by universities throughout Europe. Her publications include several papers on use of technology in higher education and the concept of quality within the eLearning field.

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Nataša Perović is the Digital Education Advisor at University College London supporting the adoption of UCL's learning and teaching strategies across the School of Life and Medical Sciences and implementation of ABC method across UCL. She also contributes to academic development sessions in UCL Arena Centre for Research-based Education. She has a background in science, web development and teaching and has been working on e-learning development in medical and allied health sciences in higher education since 2006. She is particularly interested in learning design, blended learning, open educational resources and use of media in education. She co-developed the ABC learning design method, now used worldwide and is a member of the Erasmus + project ABCtoVLE UCL team.

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## Proposal

### **Title: Sharing the ABC approach to learning design across three European universities**

#### **Abstract**

The three major European research-intensive universities, Università degli Studi di Milano (UniMi), Sorbonne Université and University College London (UCL) all have ambitious strategies to develop digitally rich teaching programmes. Yet only a minority of their teachers possess the design skills, technology knowledge and time to remodel their courses. To address the introduction of blended formats, in 2014 UCL developed ABC, a dynamic hands-on learning design workshop. Using rapid prototyping, course teams work collaboratively over 90 minutes to create a visual 'storyboard' of the learning activities (both online and offline) required to meet the course learning outcomes. Assessment methods, cross-program themes and institutional strategies are also integrated into the process. The ABC method was trialed successfully at UniMi and Sorbonne University in 2017 but the approach raises complex issues of academic development prior to the workshop and learning design support afterwards. Effective adoption of shared methodologies requires considerable cultural and linguistic localisation.

**Key words:** Academic development, ABC, learning design, localisation.

#### **1. Introduction**

Like many research intensive universities, Università degli Studi di Milano (UniMi), University College London (UCL) and Sorbonne University (SU) now assert aspirational strategies to develop future-looking, digitally rich programmes. Yet in all three institutions only a few of the most pioneering teachers and academics have the educational design skills and technology knowledge to remodel their programmes in this way. For all teachers in research intensive universities, the lack of time both to acquire digital capabilities and then redevelop courses is a major limiting factor. This contradiction has often been treated as an academic development issue, but work at the three universities suggests a more holistic approach integrating skills development to a novel approach to module and course design may be more effective. A focus on learning design can be a key element of strategic change and, as we have found, academic development, at the three universities.

Even if educational and technical support is readily available to remodel courses - and this is far from common in large research-intensive institutions - conversations can be poorly structured and hampered by the lack of a shared "design language". Teachers and educational developers or

technologists sometimes think of their courses and the student experience from markedly different perspectives and this can be alienating and frustrating for both parties. In order to address these multiple challenges the three universities required a more efficient, streamlined process to innovate and adapt that could be both aligned to institutional strategies and also based on sound educational principles and practices.

This issue was surfaced in 2016 at UniMI when the university launched the EXEL (Experiment of Enhanced Learning) initiative. EXEL aims to foster capacity and community around teaching and to promote an institutional culture that values effective teaching and meaningful learning. The project collaborates with individual academics, academic departments and schools to support and help develop excellent teaching across the university at all stages of a faculty member's career. The EXEL team had the daunting task to engage in redesign with a wide range of academics within a short timescale. Multi-day intensive processes such as the well-known Carpe Diem and CAeIRO workshops while effective, seemed to demand too much time from hard-pressed academics and EXEL's small support team.

Sorbonne University faced a similar challenge. Sorbonne is a new multidisciplinary university arising from the union of Paris-Sorbonne and the University Pierre and Marie Curie (UPMC) on January 2018. The university attaches great importance to academic development as part of its overall policy and strategy and later in 2018 a new law has been implemented mandating the academic development of the new teachers at the university. This is expected to enhance the pedagogical choice and innovation across the university and encourage re-structuring of courses. At UPMC the academic development of its teachers was already at the heart of its concerns, each disciplinary department of UPMC could already offer teachers support on their teaching methods through peer feedback. However it was recognised this process rarely focussed on course redesign and the diversity of the learning process. Sorbonne now works to promote projects that focus on innovative change initiatives that enable multifaceted courses in different formats, face-to-face and online.

Through joint membership of the League of European Research Universities (LERU) E-Learning Thematic Group the Milan and Sorbonne teams heard of LERU fellow-member UCL's fast-paced hands-on learning design workshop called ABC (Young and Perovic 2016). UCL's popular ABC workshop had been developed specifically for teachers in LERU-type universities and had already been used successfully for over two years in UCL. The UCL team had found the method to be highly transferable and its 'train the trainers' workshops had proved successful and popular across Europe and further afield (ABC 2018b).

The ABC approach seemed to align closely to the immediate needs of Milan and Sorbonne universities. The key to UCL's distinctive methodology is pace, engagement and collaboration. In the original format, in just 90 minutes using a rapid prototyping workshop teaching teams co-create a visual 'storyboard' outlining the type and sequence of learning activities, both online and offline required to meet the programme or course learning outcomes. Assessment methods, cross-program themes and institutional policies are also integrated into the process. ABC had been found to be particularly useful

for new programmes or those changing to a wholly online or more blended format. The UCL team emphasised the alignment with institutional strategies but also the opportunities the method offered for staff engagement and development.

The UCL team had found for many academics the participation in the collaborative paper-based process was almost as significant as the outcomes. Storyboarding is an established technique from film-making that illustrates a narrative as a sequence of scenes. The ABC version provides visual overview of the learner experience externalising the course structure therefore making it immediately available for discussion by the whole academic team. The storyboard's sequences are learner activities, classified into six type cards using a simple and easy-to-learn taxonomy based on the highly respected 'Conversational Framework' created by Laurillard (2012). In the ABC process, the activity types are represented by cards placed and rearranged on a pre-printed storyboard canvas. Example activities are provided but teams are able and encouraged to add their own activities to the cards. Trials showed the creative hands-on, analogue format of the workshop together with the presence of colleagues and support staff stimulates a wide-ranging discussion. This generally includes the purpose of the course or programme, teaching methods, alternative technologies and assessment methods and above all the student experience. The storyboard approach also reinforces the notion that the design is a purposeful, discussable and transparent narrative describing the student experience over time (ABC 2018a, Evers 2017).

## **2. Localisation of ABC**

The teams of UniMi and Sorbonne University realised that the key to adapting any "global" methodology was localization. UniMi and Sorbonne though in many ways similar institutions to UCL, are at different stages of the educational development process. The drivers for educational change at the three universities are analogous but expressed and implemented in different ways. The main educational strategy at UCL focuses on Connected Curriculum (Fung 2017), promoting research-based teaching and learning. This institutional change driver has propelled ABC into more widespread adoption and the UCL developers have carefully aligned and integrated ABC with the Connected Curriculum initiative. ABC designs are often used at UCL to highlight where university strategies and initiatives are reflected in the student experience. ABC was clearly conceptualised at UCL as a learning design methodology and in its home institution and 'classical' format it is largely promoted as a mainstream and practical academic process rather than a staff development intervention, although it is now also embedded in UCL's academic development programmes.

At Milan and Sorbonne the strategic context is quite different. Therefore ABC has been aligned more closely with academic development than strategic initiatives. Milan is in the process of defining its own educational strategy and along with it the academic development support that will be offered. Sorbonne is also building a strategy while offering an extensive catalogue of workshops and trainings in several areas. The adaptation process as shown in these two universities is not a simple process of translation or even remodelling the ABC workshop itself but of repositioning it to take account of national, institutional and cultural contexts. Language localization is an important first step however

to reduce barriers, partly to reduce cognitive load in the workshop itself (even if the participants are proficient in English) and partly to ensure the methodology is seen as “adopted” by the local institution and not in any way imposed externally. The accurate translation of the ABC activity cards which represent and exemplify the learning types was the first task for UniMi and Sorbonne. This translation itself turned out to be an integral part of the ABC process. For the Italian team, some of the English to Italian mapping was difficult, and the French team made several inquiries in the literature of the education sciences for defining the most appropriate terms to use. The discussion between the three teams helped to clarify and embed the ABC concepts in the context of the national educational and institutional cultures.

### **3. Issues arising from local adoption**

For Sorbonne the feedback from the first trial workshops in 2017, co-delivered with the UCL team, was very positive. Nevertheless a few points such as the short length of the workshop and the (apparent) absence of a theoretical background were critiqued. As a response the team doubled the length of the workshop to three hours and added several theoretical elements such as Bloom’s taxonomy, constructivism and constructive alignment between learning objectives, activities and assessment. The method was renamed ABCD (activity based curriculum design) and contextualised it to its participants - and potential participants - quite carefully in order to manage expectations and respond to the expressed needs. The remodeled workshop is offered in an “open” format to individual teachers as a way of introducing the principles of learning design as well as a method for team-based working on the design of a course. As at UCL it can be customised for local contexts.

At UniMi the initial trials of ABC also co-delivered with the UCL team were equally successful in stimulating wide ranging discussions of teaching methods, blended learning and assessment methods. With this experience the EXEL team ran several subsequent workshops in UniMi with a range of academic groups (Milani *et al* 2017). As at Sorbonne, ABC was closely linked to academic development initiatives and in this instance was integrated with an online course, “Blended Learning” (Educate-it 2017) from Utrecht University which is another LERU member and run twice in the summer 2017 and 2018.

In Milan, ABC is always used with teachers belonging to the same programme, or to the same year. It’s always a “group” experiences with specific goals identified during previous meeting with the programme coordinator. Also the effectiveness is discussed not only with participants (thanks to an online survey) but also with the coordinator, to identify together future directions of academic development. This is possible because in UniMi ABC works perfectly to create communities of teachers, develop a common educational language and engage in educational re-design.

Both Sorbonne and Milan found that ABC provides the right context in which course redesign can be discussed in a new way.

A number of interesting themes have emerged through the adoption of ABC in these two universities.

1. ABC assumes at least some awareness of blended learning methodologies and technologies as listed as suggestions on the learning activities cards. Some UniMI participants expected these would be covered specifically in the workshop, one commenting, “actually, I thought it was a course about online learning”. This is why in the localisation process UniMI and Sorbonne extended the course in different ways.
2. Similarly, some teachers in UniMI and Sorbonne were looking for more general educational development advice, such as “new tips on how to schedule lessons in order to improve the student learning process and at the same time simplify my lesson preparation work”. In a context where interest in educational innovation is quite recent, it may be risky to focus too much the technological aspects when broader educational development perspectives need to be addressed. Innovation and technology are not synonymous and this has to be clarified from the very beginning. However at Sorbonne teaching teams liked the joint presentation of the different types of activities and were happy to be able to choose between a classical face to face version of an activity and an equivalent one using digital tools.
3. ‘Branding’ is important. A workshop with a clear label (UCL in this case) could be read as “too different” to be relevant and so useful in the local context. The Sorbonne team have rebranded the approach ABCD keeping however the reference to UCL brand that provide “prestige” or “assurance” of the approach itself.
4. All teams found when ABC is used for programme redesign, building a relation with the academic lead is fundamental to ensure that participants’ expectations are managed, that the workshop recognizes and addressed the stage of development of the programme and it focuses on the most pressing tasks for the group.

More fundamentally, localising a method such as ABC must take into account the intrinsic elements such as the attitudes and societal culture of each country. The ABC method clearly places the student in the center of the reflection and choice of activities that aim to better guide him/her in his/her learning. In Italy and in France, although the vision of the teacher's role is evolving towards this image of the teacher as “mentor” who guides the student through the learning process that accompanies him/her on his/her cognitive journey, teaching practice itself still reveals the dominant perception of the teacher as “master” in front of the students. Thus several typologies of academic populations can be identified, those who voluntarily accept to rework their courses and apply their pedagogical choices, or those who find the proposals very interesting but the prepared storyboard remains on paper. There are also those who will not really be sensitive to this process of storytelling their course, but at Sorbonne University, this population rarely comes to the offered workshops.

Another essential subject, but also a source of constraints, is the parity of esteem of research and teaching. At UCL, as across the UK, the tradition of certifying university teachers, while still fairly recent, is now well established and ABC has been aligned to the the UK Professional Standards Framework (UKPSF), a nationally-recognised framework for benchmarking success within higher education teaching and learning support (HEA 2011). In France and Italy the evolution of teachers' careers is

based on their research work and not on their teaching activities. Therefore the teachers deprioritise their academic development for teaching and by consequences the time attributed on this effort.

In order to address this, in collaboration with the University of Utrecht, UniMi and Sorbonne are actively working together in order to offer a common training course about blended learning in a blended format. This will allow teachers to experience blended learning for themselves, and to gain from the advantages digital learning can offer them, such as adaptability to their personal agenda. As the UniMi and Sorbonne experience highlights, support for learning design has to recognize the particularities of programmes, individuals and preparation needed for coming in the “right time” of programme lifecycles.

Localisation also addresses post-workshop support, essential if designs are to have any chance of being implemented. The Milan and Sorbonne teams found the hands-on team-based format of the ABC workshops as motivating and enjoyable as at UCL but evaluation (ABC 2018a) had also found that where there was a lack of direct follow-up support, the participants may not be able to fully realise the plans they made during workshops. The UCL team advised Milan and Sorbonne to stage a more controlled roll-out, picking a few programmes, courses or individuals to support, helping them to implement designs and evaluating as they go along to gather evidence of impact. This is a slower implementation but provides a solid evidence base. Interestingly, UK educational developers have generally taken this more measured approach and integrated ABC workshops into a framework of module development support. A review of these initiatives in 2018 showed they had adapted the ABC resources to harmonise with institutional strategies and had achieved successful outcomes as a result (ABC2018b). UCL, UniMi and Sorbonne are now partners in an Erasmus+ project “ABC to VLE” investigating how this important post-workshop stage can be enhanced (ABC to VLE 2018).

## **Conclusion**

ABC was clearly conceptualised at UCL as a learning design methodology and in its home institution and ‘classical’ format it is largely promoted as a mainstream and practical academic process rather than a staff development intervention. The experience of sharing the ABC approach to learning design across two other European universities has revealed a number of themes. The most important is that the ‘classic’ UCL version works well as a starting point but that local approaches and even variants are likely to be required to meet institutional and cultural demands. For example the UCL team emphasises the alignment with institutional strategies but these may be at different stages in different universities and therefore may not always act as a meaningful driver. All three universities have found the ‘willingness to engage’ among academic teams is very important to the success of the approach, reluctant teams who do not see the value of change will be hard to convince, no matter how good the tool itself is. In this context the notion of ABC as an individual or group academic development tool becomes more foregrounded and may be the primary focus, at least initially. Individuals can use ABC to identify their training needs or it can be used as a multi-stage process where academics’ educational design skills and technology knowledge can be developed before the workshop, for example using an online pre-workshop course or by embedding ABC in a more ‘conventional’ academic development

programme. Post-workshop support is also key, and this is itself framed by the local technical and advisory frameworks. The UniMi and Sorbonne experience has shown ABC is not only a practical learning design tool but can be used as an opportunity and maybe even a catalyst for individual and team development.

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