

Paper Title: Tracking course design and delivery: using a home grown project management tool in flexible learning

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Practice paper outline

Course design and delivery in the context of flexible learning at the University of the South Pacific (USP) is over 40 years young. Over that time, course development and delivery methodologies progressed almost parallel to the educational technologies of the day, diverse learner characteristics and changing landscape of higher education among other things. Course design and delivery has arguably been a constant challenge in terms of monitoring progress and ensuring that more than 500 courses are delivered annually, on time and with fewer issues as possible to a regional student base encompassing 12 Pacific Island Countries. The Centre for Flexible Learning Course Manager (CFLCM), a home grown project management tool was developed to better manage the course design and delivery process. The primary users of this tool are a team of 25 specialists comprising Instructional Designers, Education Technologists and Electronic Publishers coordinated by the Senior Instructional Designer. It has been a year since the tool was developed and introduced to the team. This paper presents the experiences of the team in terms of the implementation and use of the CFLCM and implications for future use.

Introduction

The Centre for Flexible Learning (CFL) at the University of the South Pacific (USP) has been attempting to capture the process of development and delivery of courses and programmes offered via flexible learning at USP. A fragmented process and documentation system has characterised course development since the early inception of distance education at USP since the 70's. Such 'manually' organised processes documented the production cycle in terms of progress reporting (on course and programme development via word documents and email) and overall record keeping (via course profile sheets in word documents, assessments and course components details via excel sheets). While such processes were relevant for a time when technology was still developing, it had come to a point where an automated, central approach to reporting and record keeping needed to occur in light of an exponential growth in courses and programmes at USP and new strategic directions in terms of more blended and online course development and delivery. To add to this, course development staff members grew in numbers at CFL.

Mathur, Jugdev & Shing Fung (2014) suggest that although to a great extent the success of a project lies in the synergy of the project members, the project management tool equally plays an important part in gauging the completion and success of projects. Abdous & He (2008) suggest that one of the factors affecting course design is inefficient project management. It is very important to have project tracking right from the brainstorming phase. The chances of increasing the success of a project ultimately relies on the project manager, who should be able to establish methods of accountability and keeping track of the project (Shannon & Hartshorne, 2013). Keeping a close eye

on the project status reports help projects progress, and team members should provide regular reports to ensure issues and tasks completed are all documented and shared with the faculty (Chapman & Nicolet, 2002).

The CFLCM Course Manager (CFLCM) was developed and introduced in 2016 with the objective of making project management of course development and delivery more organised and efficient. The primary users of this tool are the Learning Design & Development (LDD) Team of 25 specialists comprising Instructional Designers, Education Technologists and Electronic Publishers coordinated by the Senior Instructional Designer. It has been a year since the tool was developed and introduced to the LDD team. This paper presents the experiences of the team in terms of the implementation and use of the CFLCM and implications for future use.

The practice under scrutiny

The CFLCM took close to 6 months to develop with a team of four staff members at and an outsourced computing programmer. The development of the CFLCM was partially inspired by an earlier project management tool (2008-14) that was used at CFL to manage course development. That tool however became obsolete in light of processes that evolved rapidly at CFL and a somewhat dated programming language that fell out of sync with what the USP supported in terms of IT architecture. Nevertheless, it provided a context from which to build the CFLCM. It was also inspired by a new learning design and development framework for CFL. Once the programmer was identified and contracted, work commenced in three phases. Firstly, scoping the work needed in terms of the CFLCM functionality. This took some time as the programmer needed to understand how course development and delivery worked at the coalface and from there, organically shape an intuitive and simple design. The Senior Instructional Designer (SID) primarily aided the programmer with conceptualising the functionality. The second phase was essentially the programmer developing the concept into the actual tool which was a highly consultative exchange of constructive feedback and tweaks. Phase three was testing with users from the course development team who eventually became administrators for the course manager. Bug testing in phase three threw up minor issues not picked up between SID and programmer and the intuitiveness of the user interface was better gauged this time around. Once the CFLCM was in as good a shape for a first workable version, it was released to the team following an orientation session. Courses and team allocations were pre-loaded to the CFLCM based on the annual course development portfolio set up by the SID and the admin team. The CFLCM has been used by the team for just over a year and thus far the LDD team have taken to using it as an extension of their work.

Discussion/conclusion

First impressions from the release of the CFLCM was the relative ease with which the team took to using it. Preliminary evidence of this was based on the minor incidence reports or queries logged with the Admin team. To aid the diffusion process, team members were required to start submitting their monthly progress reports via the CFLCM and cease reporting via email, as was the practice while the CFLCM was being developed. In addition to the reporting features, the team was able to view personalised summaries of their monthly work trends in graphical representations. The following observations are worth sharing from its first year of use:

- Progress reporting has become more systematic and consistent;
- Inventories of course assessments and components are centrally accessible and located;
- Team members are able to view each other's reports in the interest of transparency as well as view and keep records of their own work progress and patterns;
- There is more formal 'closure' to the reporting process;
- Courses lagging behind their development timelines are easily flagged for urgent action with content specialists and Heads of schools and departments;
- Course delivery issues are easily flagged for attention or escalation if required;
- Up to date course development information is available on demand for stakeholders such as the Faculties, regional campuses, the University Library, and the Book Centre and Student Administrative Services.

Whether the overall course design and delivery process has been enhanced because of the implementation of the CFLCM remains to be seen and perhaps best gauged over a longer period of time. To date the CFLCM contains 12 months (2 development & delivery periods) worth of course information and is insufficient for any type of comparative analysis or trend projections. However, the team sees it as a general process improvement that harmonises with the learning design and development framework and annual development and delivery portfolio. Within the first year of implementation, other intended stakeholders have not had much interaction with the CFLCM as more focus has been on the Learning Design & Development teams' use of it. Eventually, it is envisioned that Student Administrative Services, the Book Centre and the regional campuses will have more awareness and use of it with roadshows and other forms of dissemination activities.

To provide an array view of perceptions of the CFLCM, soundbite reviews were solicited from the LDD team and presented below.

- “Very fast and efficient program to record work progress.”
- “User friendly.”
- “An evidenced based reporting system.”
- “Information is archived; can refer back when needed.”
- “Able to highlight tasks accomplished with hours we input every month.”
- “Overall CFLCM is very good database for our course development and production work as it shows which semester the course is offered, course mode, course status, even can show location (i.e. either Laucala – Fiji, Alafua – Samoa and Emalus – Vanuatu), course phases, courseware (components) and history of the course in the current course production period.”
- “It may be good to access it outside of the USP intranet.”
- “Good medium to report on Moodle issues that we encounter ...”
- “We should be able to close our reports once we have finished with it so recorded tasks don’t roll over to the next month.”
- “Takes longer to log in at times.”
- “As admins we have to add project phases individually. I like to add all phases at once.”
- “Logs you out at times without warning hence losing all unsaved data.”

Take home message

Such project management systems as the CFLCM gradually require revisions. This occurs in parallel to changes in processes and systems at the higher university level. It is never perfect but it does the job and with ease of use by the team which is an essential component of buy-in to new systems. The CFLCM like any other well planned and executed project management tool creates cohesion for the team because of the ‘one stop shop’ reporting and documentation approach. The possibilities for application of such a home-grown system may not be limited to learning design and development and could be explored in terms of other similar process and framework oriented systems to enhance team and project efficiencies. Future directions for its use could extend to integration with the university’s learning management system and opening it up beyond its current intranet only access.

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