Building Bridges: Effective Learning Designer-Subject Matter Expert Collaboration Strategies

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One of the major challenges faced in learning design is fostering effective collaboration between Subject Matter Experts (SMEs) and learning designers (LDs) in the implementation of new pedagogies and learning technologies (Gottler, 2023). This area of Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) practice is still emerging in nature, with an acknowledged need for more examples of effective approaches (Pollard & Kumar, 2022; Tay et al., 2023). The importance of this collaboration is amplified by the fact that both SMEs and LDs share a key stakeholder—the learner. To ensure the learner benefits fully, both parties must work together seamlessly, drawing on their complementary skills to deliver a learning experience that is both meaningful and impactful (Pollard & Kumar, 2022).

This presentation serves as a case study, showcasing the processes used by the Institution's LD team to build positive collaboration with SMEs to integrate new pedagogies and learning technologies in the development of asynchronous mathematics modules. In particular, this project involved the integration of two learning design principles, Universal Design for Learning (UDL) and the Cognitive Theory of Multimedia Learning (CTML) (CAST, 2024; Mayer, 2024), that were foreign to the SMEs, and learning technology that had not been used previously at the Institution in the form of lightboard video recordings.

In the initial stages of this project, the Institution's LD team encountered many of the issues previously reported in literature regarding working with SMEs, such as ambiguity of roles and tasks, power struggles between SMEs and LDs, and SME resistance to the use of new education technology and pedagogies (Chen & Carliner, 2020; Tay et al., 2023). To overcome these issues and to ensure the success of the project, a new approach was developed that prioritised clarity, communication and the common goal of building an excellent learner experience.

The new approach drew on research into the factors that facilitated or hindered the relationship between SMEs and LDs, and included the following core principles:

- Mutual respect: LDs worked to build an environment where the expertise and time commitments of both SMEs and LDs were acknowledged and valued (Tay et al., 2023).
- Shared commitment: Processes were introduced to ensure that project goals were well defined and that a shared vision for the learning modules was established to foster a strong investment in the project's success (Chen & Carliner, 2020). In particular, we placed the learner experience at the centre of decisions regarding module design, by setting the student as the core "stakeholder" in design workshops.
- Common language: Steps were taken to establish a common language between SMEs and LDs by defining terms and processes to facilitate clear communication (Gottler, 2023).
- Empowering expertise: Both SMEs and LDs were empowered to contribute their unique skills to the project and given autonomy to make decisions during the design and implementation process (Chen & Carliner, 2020). For example, we acknowledged the expertise of our SMEs in classroom teaching and chose to record teaching videos without a formal script, yet based on an agreed scope and examples.

This presentation will expand on how these principles were enacted practically to foster a strong partnership between SMEs and LDs characterised by effective communication, positive relationships and a strong sense of ownership of the project. The presentation will conclude by illustrating how this collaborative approach ultimately led to the successful completion of the

project within constraints such as competing priorities and firm deadlines.

Keywords: Subject Matter Expert, Collaboration, Ways of Working, Technology Implementation

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