

# ASCILITE 2023

*People, Partnerships and Pedagogies*

## **Unveiling the chameleon: How can we successfully collaborate and deepen partnerships in educational design projects**

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Collaborative practices are at the heart of the development process in educational programme and course design. Collaboration between partners is essential in learning design projects as it brings together diverse perspectives, expertise, and skills to create effective learning experiences. However, it also presents numerous challenges that can hinder the collaborative process. This paper draws on the experiences of an academic developer and an online learning designer over several online/blended projects carried out in a higher education setting, individually and together. As co-project leaders in the design and development cycle, the authors critically examine through a reflective lens how leadership, behavioral characteristics and digital tools support successful collaborations in their learning design projects. The paper discusses recommendations that strengthen partnerships and support collaborations.

Keywords: collaboration; faculty support; leadership; educational design; behaviour

### **Background**

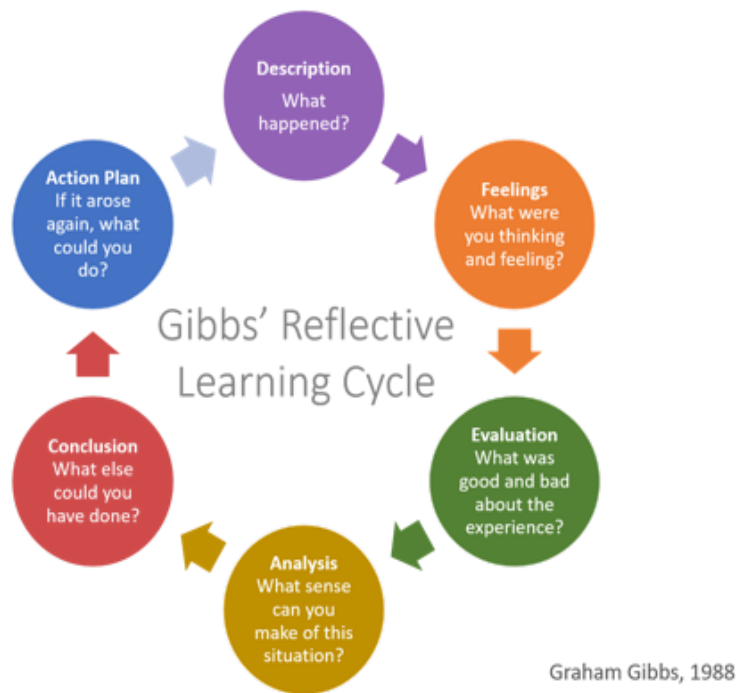
This paper critically examines findings on achieving successful collaboration and deepening partnerships, based on the experiences and insights of two specialists in educational design and curriculum development, reflecting on their leadership roles in project work. The university released a new teaching and learning framework in 2020 and is in the process of implementing an institutional curriculum transformation strategy. The framework and wider changes embarked on are informed partly by constructivism and associated learner-centric approaches and are underpinned by a vision of inclusive, equitable lifelong learning.

The Teaching and Learning Design Team was established in 2020, and includes learning designers, application specialists, software developers and educational technologists. The learning designers work in faculties, with a variety of academic staff to support teaching and learning in programme and individual course design. The role of the academic developer is faculty-based and involves various workstreams related to the broader area of pedagogical change, digital pedagogies, and educational design, including the project management of learning design projects.

The projects undertaken in our roles revolve around introducing innovative ideas, technologies, or pedagogies. Faced with new evidence and changes to pedagogical practices, staff in higher education often experience ambiguity. At times, a project can start as an ‘optical refresh,’ and more areas for change rise to the surface during the project work. Depending on the context, epistemological stances of participants, existing pedagogical practices, and digital capabilities, the depth and degree of change will vary. Courses can be taught with contemporary learning theories and active learning in mind, but teachers might not have been able to devote time to the course design, or the look of the course site, or might be unsure how to realise interactivity in the online space.

### **Research approach**

This paper provides an autoethnography from two individuals who work in educational design with academics. A reflective case study approach was used. This methodology is appropriate to provide reflections on how deeper partnerships can be supported. Reflection is a vital tool to enable insights from experience and gain knowledge for further decisions as Schön (1983) suggests and allows us to highlight thought processes and challenge beliefs. Gibbs’ (1988) Reflective Cycle (Figure 1) has helped us to analyse and evaluate our experiences in a systematic manner as it seeks to facilitate reflective practice and explore thoughts, feelings, and emotions.



**Figure 1: Gibbs' Reflective Cycle, 1988.**

## Project development and evaluation

With over 30 years between us in Higher Education, and as participants in a vast number of educational design projects, we take this opportunity to reflect on our experiences, and to observe our feelings and thoughts as project leads. As part of our personal process to educational design, we allow time to evaluate how the project went, what was successful and could have been done differently in a to improve future projects.

Our professional practice as academic developer and learning designers in higher education is multi-faceted. Relationships are at the heart of the design and development work to establish partnerships with teachers. Conversations and clarification-seeking are not necessarily seen as standard design tools, but these aspects foster ways of working together successfully. Since the pandemic, much of the design and development work within teams and project members has moved from an in-person to the online space. Moving to an online space saw the process of project development change. Project meetings were carried out via Zoom, project processes required more asynchronous activity as project management used a number of tools to track activity and meet timelines. An agile project management approach was undertaken, an iterative methodology, with regular project meetings, storyboarding, prototyping, and refining until the project outcomes are achieved. This approach has multiple positives; online meetings have increased the availability of team members, and collaboration tools such as Teams, MS Office 365, Canvas and Zoom have been used to support vital asynchronous development, and as a space to connect and collaborate with all project members. However, this change required team members to become comfortable with working and communicating online.

Our work often requires a balancing act between considering institutional direction and the reality of faculty preferences. Many project briefs are underpinned by an alignment of existing educational design with institutional pedagogical visions. Tensions can exist due to perceptions of the authors being in a 'regulatory role' and 'sent from the central university' or 'imposed' on the faculty. Some collaborators may be resistant to change, clinging to personal preferences or traditional approaches. This resistance can impede the collaborative process, limit exploration of innovative ideas, and hinder the project's overall progress. Reoccurring challenges can be communication barriers, differing goals and priorities, varying levels of expertise, time constraints, a lack of trust and accountability, and technical and logistical issues.

Conversely several challenges to effective successful collaboration have arisen that can happen in any project work. These include a mix of leadership behaviors and collaborative approaches that can result in task-oriented approaches that require careful management (Henkel, Marion, Bourdeau, 2019). Our experiences with these challenges have emphasized the need to identify the characteristics of successful collaboration at varying project

stages.

## **Analysis - characteristics of successful project partnerships**

The characteristics of effective collaboration to achieve successful project completion in educational design projects have been surprisingly little researched in higher education. A significant contribution to achieving successful project completion is identified by Henkel, Marion and Bourdeau (2019) who examined the significance of task oriented versus relationship-oriented leadership behaviour. Henkel et al. (2019) found that project management degrees offered by educational institutions focus significantly more on technical project manager skills than the soft skills, including leadership. However, any project management training or degree should emphasise leadership behavioral styles, as Henkel et al. (2019) argue. Leadership behavioral styles can significantly impact on the success of partnerships and project completions.

Task-oriented leadership can be compared to a waterfall and is a linear process. Tasks depend on contributions from team members that are reliant on a step-by-step process to support project outcomes. In contrast stands the individual, personal leadership style that incorporates skills such as adaptability, looping, empathy and situational engagement. In their research Bawa and Watson (2017) recognise these skills as core characteristics in successful collaborative projects and therefore created the acronym of CHAMELEON – Communication, Humility, Adaptability, Mentorship, Empathy, Looping, Engagement, Oscillation.

## **Reflections and Discussion**

Reflecting on our experiences with behaviors and partnerships in educational project design, we have identified two core aspects in successful projects to support and foster partnerships. Firstly, we encourage a more situational relational collaborative environment and secondly, we want to emphasise the value of adopting the CHAMELEON characteristics, involving Communication, Humility, Adaptability, Mentorship, Empathy, Looping, Engagement, Oscillation. Building on this, further recommendations include combining and balancing situational relational leadership with task-oriented project leadership, to guide, and motivate, in a positive co-operative project environment.

Additionally, active listening as a leader and participant is vital, as is being adaptable and empathetic, with a flexible mindset, to engage with all participants to meet objectives. Emotional intelligence and conflict management, understanding and managing emotions, both your own and others', is crucial in project development. Emotional intelligence helps build effective relationships, handle conflicts, and maintain a positive and productive work environment, especially when most work is now undertaken in the digital space.

Due to the finite nature of projects, and the move to online project meetings, in-person meetings are often scheduled weeks apart. Digital tools and processes allow team members to work asynchronously and collaboratively on working documents, in between meetings to ensure tasks are reviewed and completed in a timely manner. Development sandpit canvas shells were also used to share prototype examples, so academics could review and interact with examples. Tools such as MS Teams and Zoom are used as a main project management digital tool, to ensure communication is timely, tasks are recorded and online collaboration spaces are available. Once team members familiarised themselves with the tools, the virtual team worked more efficiently because they have access to the same data in one place, anytime, from anywhere.

## **Contribution and limitations of the study**

The findings are from a particular institution and reflect personal, subjective views on projects the authors have experienced. However, we believe that these insights can inform participants in educational design partnerships about what influences and how to foster collaboration. It is an authentic experience, in a time of ongoing institutional change. The study contributes to our understanding of the complexity of change initiatives and collaboration. A limitation of this study is that the voices of the wider stakeholder participants are only included anecdotally. This research opens the door to a future study with all project participants to examine the characteristics, including the leadership behaviors and tools, that they see as contributing to successful project outcomes and to foster partnerships.

## **Conclusion**

In this paper we seek to highlight that deeper partnerships are built on leadership behaviours' that emphasise

relationship skills, seen at the heart of creating effective collaboration. Skills such as clear communication, frequent adaptability and situational responsiveness, and a lens of empathy and flexibility, are equally as important as the task orientated project skills, such as planning, scoping, time, and resource management for a successful educational design project. With a focus on outcomes, we need to consider with our project participants how we can balance situational relational and task-oriented project leadership to deepen our partnership, ideally to go beyond project completion.

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