

Experiences of Working with the COL Electronic Template

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ABSTRACT:

At PCF-4 2006 in Jamaica, the Commonwealth of Learning (COL) launched an electronic template designed for the development of distance education instructional material. In this paper I discuss the experiences of working with the COL electronic template. These discussions mainly revolve around how the writers, who are often novices with the use of computers and writing of distance education instructional material, cope with the two tasks, and in the process develop professionally. This paper will outline the changes made within the template to suit the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL) House Style Manual and how it has helped to improve the quality of instructional material. I will also discuss the advantages and disadvantages of using the template within the Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning with the hope that such information can be transferred as lessons learned to other open and distance learning institutions thinking about using such a tool.

INTRODUCTION

The Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning (COLL), Polytechnic of Namibia (PoN) works with distance learning, and has done so since 1997. COLL currently offers seven certificate programmes, seven diploma programmes and six bachelor programmes. Its mission is as follows:

The Polytechnic of Namibia's Centre for Open and Lifelong Learning strives to advance the intellectual and human resource capacity of the nation by extending access to technologically-orientated career education and training, applied research and service, using distance learning techniques and open learning philosophies.

As one of its three support subsystems, materials development is considered an important component of an effective open and distance learning (ODL) experience. As part of this subsystem, COLL employs a team approach, making use of a writer, content editor, instructional designer and language editor in its material development process. In the past, a graphic designer was also used however; a decision was made after attending the PCF4 and being introduced to the COL template, to trial the use of this template as a major part of the materials development process. The decision to use the template was based on its perceived relative ease of use and the advantage that the components of such a template would do to remind writers of the important elements of instructional design. Other reasons, such as the costs saved by circumnavigating the use of a graphic designer also factored into the decision. This paper will outline how the COL template was adapted for use by COLL. It will also discuss the advantages and its disadvantages of using such a template (lessons learned) and in terms of improving the COLL materials development process, hence producing educational material of better quality.

A SHORT HISTORY OF ODL AT COLL AND COLLS APPROACH TO ODL

Distance learning at the PoN dates back to 1997, when the Distance Education Centre (DEC) was established. During this time, the emphasis was on preparing courses and then on finding and implementing means of making them available off-campus (Möwes, 2007). In 1999, the DEC changed to COLL in response to the development of a five-year strategic plan and the recognition that the existing name was seen as too narrowing and restrictive in its scope. PoN now subscribes to a dual mode pattern for learning. Currently, there are approximately 8829 students enrolled with the PoN. 1588 of these students are enrolled in 12,550 courses taken at a distance through COLL.

COLL subscribes to current ideals of ODL and focuses on education as being: flexible, accessible, interactive, learner-centred, life-long, and in recognising prior learning and offering a fair chance to succeed. Currently, COLL supports learning mainly through print-based material supported by some face-to-face tutorials. At this stage, the COLL relies on print-based instructional material and hence the need to ensure that these materials are of high quality and are educationally sound.

COLL takes a holistic approach to learning to meet the need of its students, ensure a total learning experience, and implement open learning principles. To do so it implements a three-fold interrelated

support structure consisting of an administrative, materials development and student support subsystems, to design, develop and deliver ODL. The materials development subsystem's rationale is to design and develop interactive study material according to distance education methodology. In doing so, the materials development process:

- encourages active learning
- employs a team approach to materials development and includes a writer, content editor, instructional designer, language editor and quality controller. The development process follows a specific house style
- includes training for its writers of instructional material.

COLL continuously looks for ways of improving its instructional material. Unfortunately, Namibia in general is restricted in its human resources and there is a very small population of people who have subject experience and who can also write instructional material suitable for ODL. As a result, COLL offers training to subject experts and supports them in their writing process by employing the team approach as mentioned above to ensure quality of its instructional materials. For this reason, new ideas about improving the writing process are always welcome. This is the main reason behind deciding to use the COL template, i.e. it was thought it could improve the writing process not only in terms of a cost measure but also as a guide for the less experienced writers. Of course many other factors came into play and these will be briefly discussed below.

DECIDING TO USE THE COL TEMPLATE

The decision to use the COL template and not send material to a graphic designer was made because of the cost saving measures it could bring and because it would provide a guide to less experienced writers. In a little more detail, the decision was made also because of:

- the templates relative ease of use
- the advantage that the template sets out all styles and formatting so that writers do not have to 'think for themselves' and material is standardised
- the 'reminders' provided for writers to include certain instructional design elements such as activities, in-text questions, feedback, objectives, to name just a few
- saving time that would otherwise be spent on graphic design
- the ability to easily revise/adapt/change the study material when needed- this is not easy when graphic designed because of the graphic design programme used by the PoN (InDesign)
- the ability for almost anybody to be able to open the document as it is in Microsoft word, compared to if it was graphic designed and in InDesign.

The biggest incentive however was the need to remind writers of the elements of a good study guide. Previously it was found that many writers did not include in-text questions, a range of varied activities, case studies and were not very student friendly in terms of conversational style (Fröhlich, 2006). After presenting findings at PCF4 on the lack of such important design elements and having an opportunity to attend a presentation on the use of the COL template, the session dedicated to the COL template triggered the idea that it could serve as a guide to writers and help improve the educational quality of COLL instructional material. As such, using the template was discussed with management and the go ahead was given to adapt and use this as a trial in 2007.

ADAPTING THE COL TEMPLATE FOR COLLS USE

The original template version was adapted to suit COLL house style. The following points were adapted or changed:

- most font types were changed to various more appealing types, that were also found in previous COLL instructional material
- the colours within the template were changes to black and no colour was used.
- a number of different icons were added to the template toolbar, and some icon meanings changed in line with COLL house style.
- The structure of the template was adapted to follow COLL house style

- a number of icons were added throughout the template's standard format (those pages that are immediately viewable to the writer) to remind writers to develop these e.g. prescribed and additional readings, activities, in-text questions, feedback, references, to name just a few.
- the watermark was changed to greyscale as it was found that the original watermark was not visible during the reproduction stage
- several fields were added with text that reminded writer's how to fill out those field
- a number of comments in line with the COLL house style were added to the formatting marks to remind writers of important elements that must be included in their instructional material

These were the main elements adapted/changed within the COL template. The COLL user guide, included in the House Style Manual, was also changed in line with these adaptations.

PREPARING THE WRITERS TO USE THE TEMPLATE

25 writers used the template in 2007 for the first time. In preparation, a two-day training workshop was held to introduce the writers to the concept of ODL, the need of tailoring instructional material for distance learners and in using the electronic template. During this time, writers were also given time to start writing their material using the template. The evaluation conducted showed that all writers were happy with the training and especially with the template, with 92% of respondents rating it good to excellent in terms of usefulness of information, educational value and appropriate in terms of writing for ODL. Most thought it was an excellent tool. Unfortunately, seven writers could attend this training. They were individually assisted with short personal training sessions held with four of them. The other two did not receive training at all and hence only submitted instructional material in a normal word document. Additionally, the instructions for using the template were included in the COLL House Style Manual and writers were referred back to it when problems were experienced. If they could not be solved through the use of the manual, writers were advised to contact COLL for further support.

EXPERIENCES OF THE WRITERS USING THE TEMPLATE

During the course of the writing process, as writers submitted drafts, it became clear that some were struggling with the template in terms of its proper use. Not all writers have a good grasp of using computers and during the process of writing their material, significant numbers experienced difficulties. This ranged from writer's computers having only older versions of Microsoft word installed which thus affected the template toolbar, to those that had very little experience with computers in general. These writers struggled to correctly use the template resulting in many different variations of fonts, wrong heading styles and formatting, a loss of some material, especially within activities attempting to spread across more than one page, icons in wrong places, incorrectly filled in icons and in some cases corrupt documents. It was also found that the template does not like working with specific mathematical programmes that insert special characters as it threw out the formatting of the document. Also, that the new Microsoft Vista programme does not recognise the template and that the template cannot be used with it all. Overall, a significant amount of time was spent fixing the technical and style and formatting of the majority of material. Surprisingly, with so many difficulties very few writers complained about the template, only those who experienced great difficulty because of the older versions of Microsoft word they were using which caused many more styles than should be found, or because they could not use it all due to the incompatibility with Microsoft Vista.

These difficulties served to make any bonus gained by not using a graphic designer less of an advantage because of the one person available and capable of fixing template and related technical and content errors. Time became a real and urgent issue as this staff member had many other duties to attend to and could not spend quality time in fixing all errors.

Another unexpected outcome of using the template was that it extended the length of instructional materials i.e. the result was more pages. This was not a major difference but over the reproduction of many materials over time, the cost for reproduction could increase.

In terms of the positive experiences, many writers found that once they became used to the template and were capable of using it correctly, it saved them a lot of time with formatting. Investing a little time at the beginning of the process seemed to save them a lot of time in formatting the document throughout the

writing process. This perception was also helped because they knew that if they did experience any technical difficulties, that COLL would fix it in the final draft of the material. As a result, they informed COLL of any other technical problems they did not know how to fix and focussed more on the content.

In addition, many writers also noted how it helped to overall improve their general computer skills. In these cases, the writer was semi-forced to work with the template and hence they spent the time getting to know how to do this and in the end, professionally developed their general computer skills. These people often called COLL to come to their office/home to help them with certain aspects of the template.

What's more, writers were much happier being in control of how their instructional material 'looked'. This is especially with regard to pictures/diagrams/graph size and placement and in the 'look' in general, which in the past, could sometimes, when being graphically designed by a third person, be considered unsatisfactory to them.

Related to this, documents can now also be easily changed and adapted when needed, something not possible when graphically designed. This means a quicker revision and editing stage if errors are found and a faster return to the shelves. It also means costs saved by again circumnavigating a graphic designer as often a large proportion of study material if not all of it, has to be re-designed to fit in any significantly new or revised material.

Lastly, the adapted template was very successful in getting the writers to remember to add activities, in-text questions, prescribed and additional readings, references and more. In the majority of cases, all of the aforementioned elements were included, if in varying degrees. However, just the prompting of the writers to include such elements were enough to at least have the icons in the original template completed. In most cases, more icons were added with the result of much more appealing, relevant and interesting instructional material.

LESSONS LEARNED ADAPTING AND USING THE TEMPLATE

The template as it stood, did not have many of the elements needed by COLL and hence quite a bit of adapting was needed. The major point made here is it was not an easy job for the responsible PoN staff member, who was not so familiar with Microsoft templates in the first place, to make the necessary changes. It took a lot of trial and error to work out how to change the template. A recommendation is that the user guide be expanded to include a section on how to adapt the template toolbar and various other elements of the template structure so that it can be adapted to a larger extent without too much effort in getting to know Microsoft templates.

In terms of the use of the template by writers, it is necessary that the template be compatible with various software, specifically that used by mathematicians. In the PON case, the software Mathstype is not completely compatible with the template. Neither is Microsoft Vista, which may prove to be a major problem in the future. Warning writers at the beginning of the process of the limitations of the template with regards to software compatibility will enable them to try and use computers with the appropriate software earlier on. This will not then distort the template styles and formatting, which often happens if you use software that is not very compatible. As an added precaution note should be made that these extra styles and formatting are saved to the document so that even once you use compatible software, the extra unwanted styles and formatting are brought along (and saved with) the document.

All users also need the time to get to know the template. Allocating time within the writers training workshop helped to kick start that process but not all writers took up on the offer. Being available to support the writers in their own workplace/home is also important, and to do so soon after being contacted is also a lesson well learned. These writers tended to appreciate the help, ask again if they needed more support and eventually submit material that was not overly problematic in terms of the technical issues of the template. However, those writers who did not ask for help usually submitted material full of errors. Lesson learned here is to offer to come to writers' office or home as often as is required and to make sure this offer is followed through. Related to this, fixing errors only on the very final draft is recommended as writers will often experience the same problems with their software and any changes made in earlier drafts could be reversed.

As a final point, it is not easy to ignore empty icons/form fields within a template. Thus, including the basic essential instructional elements such as icons and form fields within the template serves as a useful and simple structure for getting writers with little experience to include such elements.

CONCLUSION

As this paper briefly sets out, the adapted COL template had its advantages and its disadvantages. In terms of advantages it served to improve the educational quality of the PoN instructional materials, saved graphic design costs, saving the writer time in designing formats and styles, enabled the instructional materials to have a easily recognised standard style and format, allowed the writer to have some degree of control over the layout of their instructional material and revise and edit them easily and quickly and, inadvertently professional developed writers in the use of templates, and computers, in general in the process. The disadvantages included the incompatibility of the template with some software programmes such as the older Microsoft Office and newer Vista programmes used, with specific subject software used in the mathematics department, and with, the length of pages of the material increased and could increase reproductive costs. Also, a disadvantage lay with the time spent with a large number of documents in fixing up technical issues, because of incompatibility with software or the inability of the writer to properly use the template.

Overall, the template, when adapted, proved to be a valuable addition to the development of quality materials within COLL. Its advantageous outweighs the disadvantages and as a result, COLL will continue to use it in the development of instructional material.

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