Hanna Pihlajarinne, Ville Haapakangas & Henri Annala

16. FIRST EXPERIENCES FROM "HOW TO DESIGN AN ONLINE COURSE" FOR TAMK TEACHERS

Abstract

During spring and autumn 2016, three digimentors designed and created an online course *How to Design an Online Course* aimed for TAMK staff. This article describes how the course was created, and what are the first experiences from the course pilot that was carried out in the second period of 2016.

How did it start?

Everything started at the beginning of 2016, when the digimentors participated in a workshop by Mark Curcher. The purpose of the workshop was to brainstorm ideas for online courses that digimentors could design to support the TAMK strategy for digitalization. The workshop was based on a collaborative learning design concept by Gilly Salmon.

As a result of the workshop, three digimentors, Henri Annala, Ville Haapakangas and Hanna Pihlajarinne, started to design and build a course called *How to Design an Online Course* aimed for TAMK staff. The three digimentors found the topic of the course very interesting, because the majority of questions they had received from their colleagues was related to online course creation: how to do it, what methods and tools to utilize and how. Even though Henri, Ville and Hanna had never worked together before, the course was born as a result of two f2f workshops and intensive online collaboration, showing the power of digital tools and teamwork in the best possible way.

Fundamentals for the course creation

At the very beginning, it was decided that the core of the learning process would be the participants' own course: their ideas, objectives, and students. The course is designed so that the participants should be able to design their own course during 7 weeks by using 5–6 hours per week. The participants learn the relevant theory, but also obtain practical experience of being in the online learners' role, simultaneously having constant support for building up their own online course.

In addition, it was decided that the course would be based on team learning and online collaboration, and it emphasizes the online teacher's role as a mentor and facilitator. All the materials in the course are in English. The course was decided to be built in Tabula, where most of the TAMK teachers' own course are also created during the course. Normally, the number of tools used in a single course should be limited for the sake of consistency and user-friendliness, but in this course, it was decided to introduce a wide variety of tools for use. The purpose of this was to support the learning during the course and to make the different tools and methods familiar for the participants. The tools included the course blog, different virtual discussion forums, different tasks, games, badges, small groups, etc.

Henri, Hanna and Ville liked Gilly Salmon's collaborative learning design concept so much that they decided to use it also as the framework of the online course. This collaborative learning design concept utilizes the so-called *Five Stage Model*, which is illustrated in Figure 1.
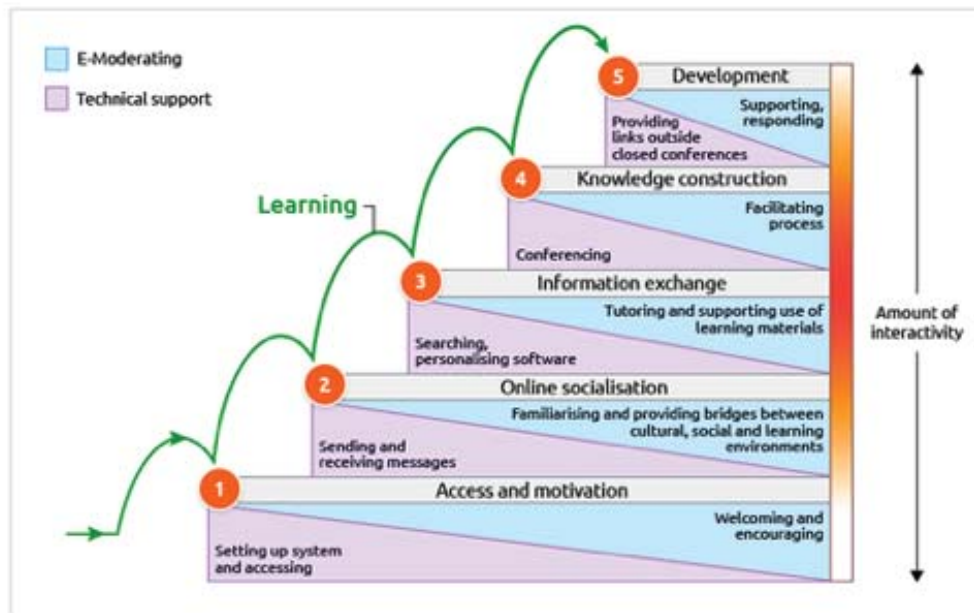
Figure 1. The *Five Stage Model* by Gilly Salmon (Five Stage Model, Gilly Salmon)

In the *Five Stage Model*, learning is supported through a structured developmental process (Salmon, 2016). The defined five stages make it easy to logically proceed from an idea through sketching to building a course. From phase to phase, the understanding and interactivity increases. In all the phases, the student is strongly supported by moderation and technical support. After the course prototype for *How to Design an Online Course* was created, it was decided that there would first be a pilot implementation to receive feedback and experiences which would help the three digimentors to further improve the course.

Course content & structure

The course was designed to be completed in 7 weeks, out of which 5 weeks are active weeks for learning and building the course. The structure follows the Five Stage Model by Gilly Salmon (Salmon, 2016). During the first week, the participants are introduced to each other and the online learning environment. This was supported

by organising a "pop-in" video call, where the participants were able to pop in and discuss with other participants and the course facilitator, or to ask questions about the online environment or the course practicalities. Additionally, the participants introduced themselves in the course blog.

The course participants were divided into small groups from week two onwards. During the second week, the participants familiarized themselves with different areas of online pedagogy, and in the third week they learned how to use different tools and methods that support online pedagogy and learning process online.

The fourth week served as a fast start for the participants' own course creation. Supported by the *Five Stage Model*, the participants first created blueprints for their courses, which were then followed up by more detailed storyboards. The concept of storyboard is illustrated in Figure 2. The storyboard includes timing, content, how the five stages are implemented, online activities that are called "e-tivities", and the evaluation of the different phases (Salmon, 2016).
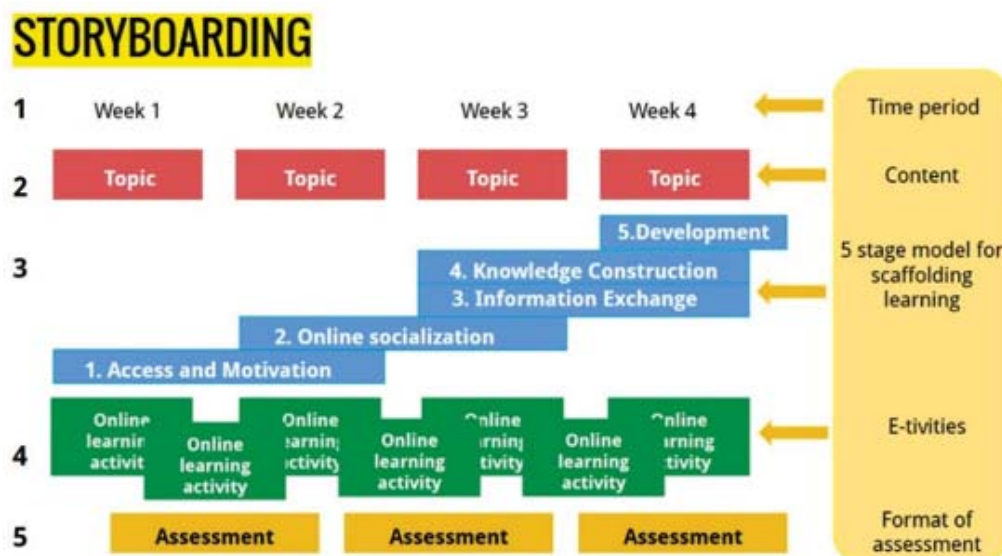

Figure 2. Storyboard according to Gilly Salmon's *Five Stage Model* (Five Stage Model, Gilly Salmon)

The fifth week included designing e-tivities. The Five Stage Model gives detailed guidance on supporting this planning work (Salmon, 2016). After planning some e-tivities, the participants were able to create a course prototype in Tabula and share it with their small group members. During the sixth week, a reality check was carried out for the prototypes inside the small teams. The participants checked for example how clear the instructions in their prototypes were, how consistent the structure was, and whether the course included all the information the student needs. With the help of this reality check, the participants were able to further improve their online courses.

During the seventh and last week of the course, the participants evaluated their online course prototypes using the TAMK eCourse evaluation form. In addition, the facilitators collected feedback from the course, awarded participants with badges (some badges were given already during the course), and prepared certificates for the students who had completed the course.

Lessons learned

The pilot course was carried out during the last period of 2016. There were 20 participants, and all of them had at least some sort of an idea of the course they wanted to create online. According to the course feedback, there is definitely a need for this online course. Additionally, the way this course was built was good. On average, the participants evaluated the course from good to excellent. Based on the feedback, the materials were good and versatile. The participants saw that the variety of methods and tools used was useful.

The participants' own experience as online learners during the course was seen as beneficial. When the participants tried to efficiently follow long videos or work actively in an online team, they

saw the challenges that the students are also facing. The small groups had excellent discussions on how these kind of challenges could be supported and decreased. "If I cannot do this, how can I expect my students to do it?" asked one participant.

The greatest challenge for the participants was time and time management. The participants evaluated their own participation ranging only from fair to good. During the course, many participants realized that it was not possible for them to participate in the course actively. It was not possible for them to use 5–6 hours per week for the course, so they didn't proceed into the storyboarding or prototyping phase. This was an important lesson learned from the pilot. In the future implementations, the participants need to be supported to plan ahead and reserve the required time better. In addition, the timing of the course at the end of the year was not the best one, since many participants saw the time as the busiest time of the year. Timing needs to be planned better in the future, too.

Furthermore, working in small groups was seen challenging. Because of the different schedules and working times, some participants were not happy with the way how the small groups were working. The small groups were created by the facilitators according to the course ideas, so that the small group members could support each other better. The criteria for the group construction could also be evaluated again in the next implementation to find out if there are better ways to do that.

The facilitators saw that they need to be actively involved in the course. It was seen important that the students receive answers and comments quickly. Two course facilitators ended up sharing the main responsibility for facilitating on a weekly basis, which was very effective.

The course will be further improved, and the next implementation will be available during the first half of 2017. The places for this implementation will be first offered to those who would have wanted to participate in the fully-booked pilot, but there will also be places left for others, too.

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