Creating Distance Design Courses

A guide for educators

www.DistanceDesignEducation.com

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Derek Jones

www.DistanceDesignEducation.com

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Introduction

This guide is intended for design educators creating distance design curricula, learning designs and courses (referred to collectively as 'course' in the guide).

It offers guidance, suggestions and ideas around common elements found in many distance courses and, in particular, distance design courses at The Open University UK (OU).

Successful online and distance courses tend to be those where the elements presented work well together to create an overall learning experience for students. In addition, the elements presented are not limited to online and distance education: each can be found in proximate and traditional education environments.

The guide is not based on specific case study or academic work and doesn't promote or propose any particular theoretical framework. It is presented as a pseudo-structure of a design course and intended as a useful framework (Kear, 2011), not an academically complete one.

The guide is also not an introduction or guide to online and/or distance education in itself, although many of the concepts from both are introduced. The intent is to make use of these as they apply to design education. Have a look at the **Resources page** on the DDE website for general online and distance education guides, courses and material.

Structure

The Guide follows the 'structure' of a generic distance and online design course over time (Figure 1), comprising:

> **0 Priors**: The knowledge, expertise and assumptions brought to the course
>
> **1 Spine**: Some organising and support structure and system
>
> **2 Induction**: Ways, cultures and indoctrinations of working and thinking
>
> **3 Course**: The elements that make up the actual activity and material.
>
> **4 Outputs**: The expectations and outcomes from the course

The full structure and contents are outlined visually in Figure 1.

0 Prior assumptions: Teacher beliefs affect learning designs.

0.1 Distance priors: Key differences in traditional, distance, and online learning modes.

0.2 Course context(s) and conditions: Existing student and course drivers, contexts, and conditions

0.3 Useful concepts: Chunks; Synchronicity; Proximity; Presence; Hooks; Social Learning; Thresholds, etc...

S P I N E

1.0 Dimensions, drivers, influencers: Public/Private; Social/Persona; Process/Output; Specialist/General; Distributed/Focused; Finiate/Open-ended
2.1 Identity: Tone, character, atmosphere.

2.2 Induction: IT REALLY MATTERS! To: Higher Education; Subject induction; Distance learning; IT Literacies

3.1 'Content': Assimilative material, primarily from Staff > students; multiple media and modes

3.2 Activities: Student activity; experiential learning; Making work visible; Sharing of practice; Design Methods.

3.3 Skills: Specific actions and behaviours; challenge of not being physically proximate; reflection-on-action

3.4 Tuition: Emergent, constructionist and student-centred learning events: student-tutor interaction; peer interaction;

3.4 Studio: Presentation/performance of outputs from other activities; social and peer learning; community of practice

3.6 Projects: Project and Problem Based Learning; Qualities of design brief; Contact points

3.1 Patterns: Common shapes of relations of above elements and how they interact to create your course.

4.1 Assessment: Expectations; Purpose; Mode and form; Procedures, policies and quality

4.2 Feedback: Purpose; Visibility; Reflection; Quality; Tone and character; dialogic feedback

4.3 Portfolio, PDP, Shows and publics: Closure; semi-public and public spaces; interfaces to professional publics

1.1 Structuret: (What: Where, When). Orientation and direction; Schedule / timing of activity; Key events; Proximity and synchronicity; signifying progress; Conditions and boundaries.

1.2 Personal Development: (Why) Motivation; Skills; Behaviours; Attitudes; Competencies; Gestalterpersonlichkeit; Expertise; Profesionalism; MH and Wellbeing; Participation and inclusion.

1.3 Community: (Who) Commonality, direction, community, shared conception, Tone and character; atmosphere; Community of Practice; Social Learning; Identity

1.4 Logistics: (How) LMS / VLE, Virtual Studio(s), other online services; Team members; Administrative, technical and procedural support; Personal, critical, and collegiate support

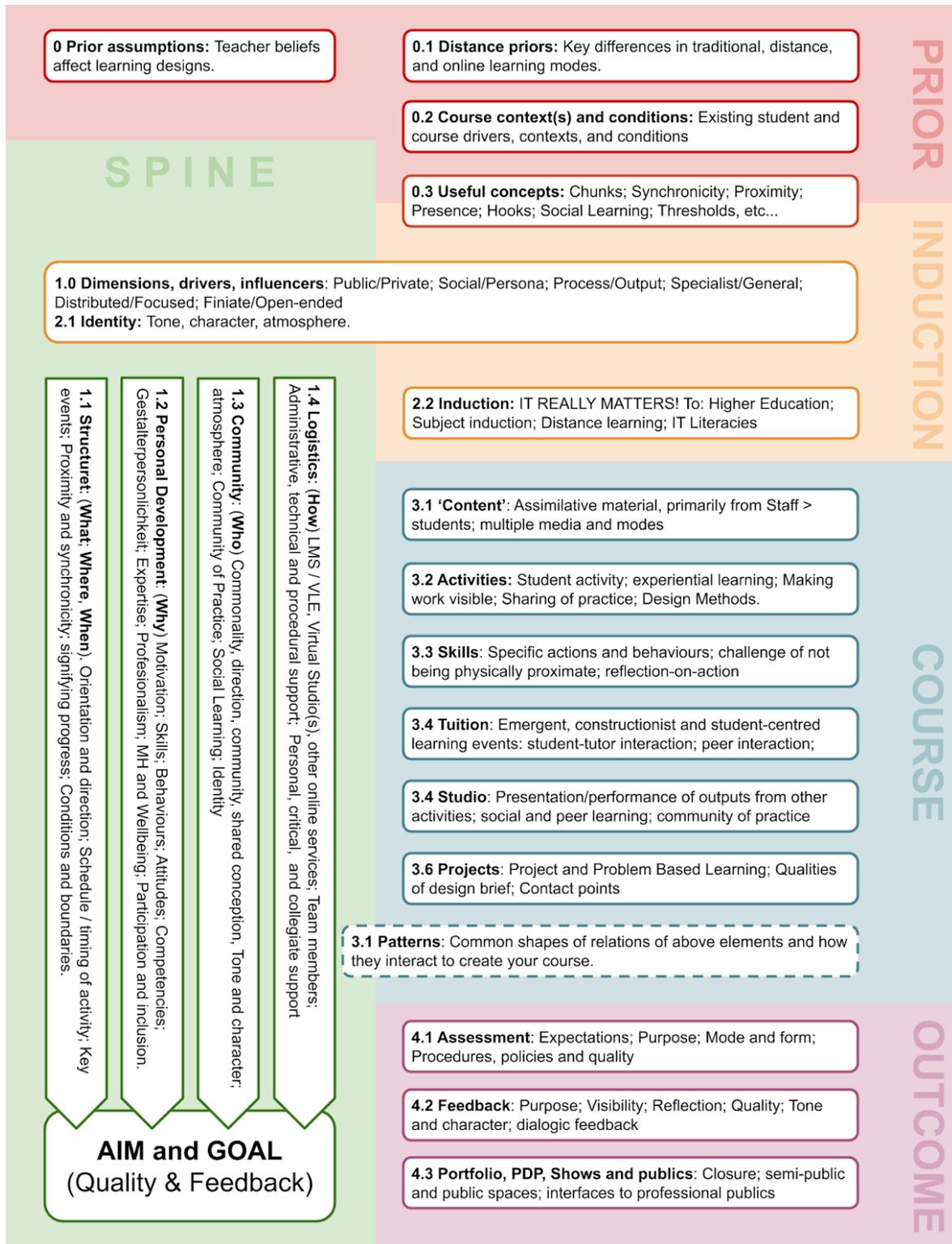**AIM and GOAL**
(Quality & Feedback)

Figure 1 The structure of the guide based on a generic design course structure

How to use this guide

These generic elements are not an instruction set or a How to… guide.

To create a design course requires a specific set of contextualised factors; too many to cover in any document. Hopefully what you will bring are your specific needs or goals, and this guide will help you think about these.

If you already have a course ready for online and distance delivery, you might simply use this guide as a check or list of things to think about.

If you have an existing blended course or are experienced and confident in blending modes of learning, you might simply want ideas and ways of thinking about parts of your course. In this case you can refer to individual sections based on what interests you.

If you need to re-plan an existing course, the chances are your overall structure and direction are fine but that you might need to focus on the transition (or transposition) to online and distance. Focusing on sections **0 Priors** and **1 Spine** and **2 Induction** will likely be of most use to you here).

If you have any feedback on this guide then please get in touch. In particular if you think anything is missing from this guide, maybe something you found helpful in your course design, then let us know (derek.jones@open.ac.uk).

Use guiding principles

After Lawson (Lawson, 2004) (and speaking as a practitioner turned academic!) having some guiding principles really helps with the learning design process.

These can be :

- Some overriding aim or value (e.g. A student-led studio-based course the prioritises emergent learning and activity)
- A set of learning objectives (e.g. formal statements of the intention of the course, like "Be able to approach complex and open-ended problems creatively and competently…" etc.)
- A set of contextual priorities (e.g. Prioritise student contexts – design for low bandwidth/intermittent access; design activities for low time-on-task / high 'defocused' cognition;)
- A set of professional conditions and outcomes

Then, any time you come across any decision or a set of undecidable relations, just look back at your guiding principles and ask whether your decision aligns.

Starting from scratch

If you're starting from scratch, then go through the whole guide to get a sense of how it's structured and how that structure might relate to a course. You might find it useful to plan out

your course spatially, using the sections as guides, similar to Figure 1. The intention is to focus on the 3. The course elements as the learning activities themselves and put these together

This guide is not intended to be used to plan a brand-new curriculum. To do this requires a lot more work than presented here, at the very least some notion of the intended learning outcomes or material.

But there may be some courses where the redesign is completely new in terms of mode or execution. In these cases, the guide can be used (in conjunction with some idea of the aim, content, context, etc. of the new course).

Here are a couple of ideas of how to use the guide to plan a new course based on 'scales' of approach. The first is based on smaller activity and works out; the second sketches an outline course and work in.

The first approach is to focus on individual learning activities. These are likely to be what you are familiar with and will have expert knowledge in. You will have some sense of how these activities relate over time: how one leads to another; which ones have to be done before others, etc. Listing these out and then ordering them using time is a good start.

As you create each activity, relate it to the course Spine elements to see how it contributes to your course. Change the activity if you wish to emphasise a particular spine element: for example, you may have a creative thinking skills activity that you wish to develop further to engage in social creativity and some aspect of the student community of practice.

Another approach, perhaps more appropriate for later stage courses or those with a more open studio-based approach, is to plan the outlines and let the specific activities emerge as the course progresses. This approach requires a lot of careful planning to support the kinds of interaction needed and that have to be transposed from a f2f studio setting. As above, do this by going through the Spine elements and planning how each will be provided and supported.

For examples, see the recipes **Blackboard Studio Model** and The Chunky Studio Model. Both of these rely on a more open course design where the student activity and need drives the specific activity. But both completely depend on good structures to support this and make sure the community is engaged.

What tends to work best is a starting point that you prefer and some kind of checking process to see how balanced your curriculum design is working out. You might find using the full structure of the guide useful in thinking about this (figure 1).

And, of course, there are many other approaches in between. If you make use of a particularly useful one, let us know (derek.jones@open.ac.uk).

Limits

There are limits to what can be achieved in distance and online education, but these are not always obvious and are often our own human limitations, based on belief as opposed to

evidence or research. The guide will cover some of these but, as a starting point, keep an open mind to the possibility that proximate practices you may think impossible, could be 'translated' in some way.

Having said this, we simply don't have good research around the boundaries of proximate and distance design education. What these limits might even be is difficult to judge or advise.

Pragmatically, some exceptional limits are likely to be:

- Activity requiring very specialised equipment (e.g. screen printing; rapid prototyping;).
- Physically dependent learning and apprenticeship (e.g. specialist crafts; jewellery metalworking;)

This guide can't cover all aspects of these particular limits and anyone with knowledge of blended working in these areas is invited to contribute (contact: derek.jones@open.ac.uk).

But perhaps a more useful question is not whether we can do these things online but rather: 'Given these constraints, what can we achieve? How can we still give students a meaningful design education?'

And, of course, there are some things you can do online that are impossible to do face to face. Much of the practice of online and distance design education is overlooked because of the primacy of f2f and some of the very challenges can often be turned to advantages. For example, the difference in contact time can promote capabilities in self-learning and independence as a design practitioner in students.

And there is also a very good chance that there will be things that educators create in the next weeks and months that no one has seen yet.

Specific words

Course: this will be used as a **general** term to refer to: curricula; modules; studios (noun); courses; learning designs; instructional designs; etc. Where these other terms are used, they are used with their specific meanings in that particular context.

Traditional: this will be used as a shorthand term for face-to-face, physically proximate modes of design teaching, where student and teacher are located in the same space (studio, classroom, lecture theatre, etc.).

Online (education): this refers to a mode of teaching where interaction is mediated online, usually via internet content and services, including

Distance (education): this refers to a mode of teaching where the participants are not normally physically proximate and where it is mediated through distance channels such as post (yes, it still exists and shouldn't be dismissed!)

VDS: Virtual Design Studio: an online version of a design studio. These can vary in purpose, function(s), design etc. and should not be seen as limited by the software

Design: Finally, to disambiguate the tricky word itself: design. It's already a difficult word (as a verb and a noun) but this is further complicated by the fact that creating a course should be a

design process in itself. So, I've tried to avoid using sentences like "designers designing a learning design for a design course". This confusion can spread to phrases as well as words. 'learning design' can mean (noun) the thing you create as an educator or (verb) what students do. I've tried to avoid these but I may have missed a few. If so, let me know (derek.jones@open.ac.uk)

0. Priors:

This section has been included because the change from traditional to online and distance education can be a personal challenge as much as a logistical or practical one. Many teachers have had no choice in this and would prefer not to have to re-learn how to teach in a completely different mode in the midst of a global pandemic.

Research shows that our beliefs and dispositions can have an implicit effect on what and how we teach (Bereczki and Kárpáti, 2018; Cheung and Leung, 2013). Very often we teach the way we were taught and, whilst this can be a positive in maintaining some traditions or professions, it can also be a barrier when you are asked to change.

What you believe about distance and online education will already be influencing your thinking and learning designs. This can be exacerbated when you're forced to change, sometimes with little support.

These beliefs, and the myriad ways they will be expressed, will affect your students, though, so it's worth exploring them. As you'd say to your students, try to keep an open mind.

0.1 Key differences in distance learning

Perceptions of distance and online

As you may have seen in recent news and media reports, the perception that distance is (by default) inferior to traditional university settings remains prevalent. This is matched in research: online is perceived by students as cheaper (and therefore less valuable), and as easier (Nichols, 2010; Nash, 2005; and Ashby 2004).

And, to be quite blunt about it, this is not helped by the fact that there are some poor-quality online courses and online learning experiences. Course materials converted to PDFs and issued to students (and nothing else) are examples of very poor learning design.

And that's lesson #1: A bad online course is almost always a bad learning design. Conversely, good online learning is possible, but it needs more than just 'putting stuff online'. Good online learning material is neither cheaper nor easier to produce.

Unfortunately, when students (or staff) bring this disposition to an online course, confirmation of this bias can be more easily reinforced because of the technology we use to get online. Any slight imperfection in a technology or interface can be seen as a fault of the learning design (whether justifiable or not). Similarly, when things work they are overlooked; when something is missing it becomes a problem. This is known as the 'hygiene effect' (Nichols, 2010a).

One of the few ways to get around this is to create high quality online courses and positive student experiences. To do this requires far more than simply putting materials online and expect learning to take place.

You can't just transfer proximate to distance

I'll be blunt here: we barely understand how design education works generally in a f2f studio, and certainly not in a way that fully describes things we can transfer from one mode to another. The subtle interactions through discussion over a design sketch may contain too many factors to enumerate – nobody's counted them yet.

But what humans are great at doing (and designers in particular) is working with metaphor and concepts: fuzzy ideas and vague definitions that allow people to fill gaps and create their own versions of reality. When you're transposing your existing course, it's often worth thinking at the conceptual level rather than how you might translate specific activities.

For example, your course might require a certain type of studio and you may enable that by having certain activities at the start. But you will also be relying on a whole range of other factors that you rarely think about: your studio might be a stitch, permission, play, or regenerative space (Bostwick-Lorenzo Eiroa and Jones, 2014), etc.

These conceptual characteristics can be transposed to online and distance but to do this, you need to be aware of them first. All too often we get sucked into discussions of specification and requirements when discussing online provision. In doing so we forget that what we are designing is not a product: it's the experience of that product and how that engages learning (Heretakis, 2020).

So, whilst you might not be able to transfer the full embodied cognitive experience of being in a studio, that doesn't mean that students are having no experience. In fact, you can use experience as a conceptual metaphor in your course design. My top (perhaps slightly biased) tip here is to use architectural metaphors: if your studio is large, open, shared space, then these are the properties you need to have in your online studio.

Thinking in this way allows common ideas to be used without relying on specifics or definitions.

Learning, not teaching

It is not necessary that students are physically present in order for learning to take place. In fact, quite a lot of learning takes place without a teacher being present…

At a distance you have to actively extend this idea by depending on it and adjusting your teaching assumptions and course design to suit. There are many ways to achieve this and it's worth looking at **general distance and online learning** resources for some ideas.

In design, you should prepare material in a way that will allow tolerance of miscommunication and misunderstanding (see **Implicit need to be explicit** below), rather than relying on implicit or uncertain topics until you have inducted students into the subject.

Even when you are clear in your communication, different students will also prefer different ways of engaging with concepts and each student will create their own interpretation / conception. Hence, for important content such as **threshold concepts**, it's worth broadening the modes and formats of your delivery (see **3.1 Content** for more on this). Similarly, blending

modes can work just as well as it does in a traditional setting – e.g. prep material on a core concept followed by synchronous discussion or activity.

A final concept worth adding here is that of allowing 'opportunities for learning' in addition to any specific expectations. Just as in a studio you wouldn't necessarily plan that learning about Concept X will take place on Tuesday the 22 April 2020, you shouldn't expect this at a distance – or assume that once you have delivered your teaching that the learning you expect will take place! So, just as you would in studio, allow multiple opportunities for learning to take place – as Schön said: "…allow the right sorts of opportunities for [students] to learn" (Schön, 1987). There's more on this in **3.4 Tuition**.

If your course does depend on you being present (e.g. for specialist skills or as part of an apprenticeship model) then the above will apply less to specific learning interactions. But it's worth noting that it will only do so because you'll already be engaging in opportunistic learning and teaching (more formally constructivist or constructionist learning (Papert, 1991; Oxman and Oxman, 1992; Oxman, 1999)).

Finally, this inversion of where and when learning takes place is central to avoiding time-consuming and energy-sapping online synchronous sessions as a default teaching model. If the majority of learning activity takes place asynchronously, you can save synchronous activity for what matters most in your course.

- Your teaching should be designed to allow learning to take place without you being present.
- Prepare material in a way that will allow tolerance of miscommunication and misunderstanding (see **Implicit needs to be explicit)**.
- Prepare key material that can be used in multiple modes and formats where you possibly can (see **3.1 Content**).
- Prepare material that allows opportunities for learning that go beyond more focused learning outcomes of the material itself.·

Implicit needs to be explicit

In a proximate setting it's very easy to pick up on miscommunication and misunderstanding – indeed, it could be argued that this is a key value of a traditional, physically proximate pedagogy. This is far harder at a distance for obvious reasons: signals and signs of communication are less obvious at a distance.

A good starting point is to be aware of those aspects of your curriculum that should be explicit and those that should remain implicit. And be aware that these are just the elements you can think of just now (you will also have a whole range of your own implicit and hidden assumptions that are harder to immediately think of).

For explicit elements (e.g. expected activity; submissions; assessments; etc.):

· Be very clear in your communications. Use efficient and effective language at all times. Short unambiguous sentences with single points.

- Allow mechanisms for questions and clarifications. Encourage interaction with these mechanisms to develop habits of clarification in students.
- Check where students are getting their information. Do not simply assume that students will ask you for clarification: very often, channels of clarification emerge between peers. This can be good and bad for hopefully obvious reasons

For example, **Goals and targets** are exceptionally important at a distance as a way of orienting students and providing a common definition (or sign) of progress and completion. Hence, assessment is a key driver at a distance (Chickering and Gamson, 1987a; Lizzio and Wilson, 2013a)

For implicit elements, (e.g. concepts that cannot be easily defined; emergent topics; etc.)

- Communicate in a number of different ways giving students choice of medium or mode – but not message
- Use dialogic and interactive activities to support elucidation and exploration: tuition events; online discussion; activity response and discussion in studio;
- Be explicitly clear about your expectations of students beyond the implicit: something may be utterly vague and uncertain but what comes from that does not have to be.

Misunderstanding is common in Computer Mediated Communication (CMC)

It may seem from contemporary social media that misunderstanding is actually a mode of communication or even its own language! This is one particular form of communication. In distance education, it's the misunderstandings between two people who **do** wish to understand one another that can be the issue. The fact that there is a desire to understand is worth remembering here…

In an online setting it's easy to slip into thinking we are conversing or engaging in normal face to face dialogue. This can ignore the fact that we are often engaging in very different activities: such as typing words using an interface or saying things that are heard only as audio. What we intend (meta-linguistically) as ironic can, for example, be taken literally.

For some good work on general approaches to distance CMC, have a look at (Kear, 2011) and (Donelan et al., 2010).

In design particularly, we traditionally mediate design criticism using a range of metalinguistics: tone of voice, body language, eye contact, or even additional words in response to a person's reaction. We cannot do this in exactly the same way at a distance and adjusting to this can take some time.

It's certainly not impossible to use devices such as humour, irony, etc. It most certainly is. But it has to be introduced to students, for example, through synchronous communications to deliberately communicate personality and using yourself as an example. Or using lots of early activities that 'require' a bit of humour or tolerance of communication to induct students into online computer mediated communication and its vagaries

And I never, never, never, use implicit or informal modes of communication when discussing key material (e.g. assessment dates!). Don't mess with assessment.

The potential difficulties in online discussion can also be an advantage in design – we engage in dialogue **about** design and **around objects** of design. Using artefacts to negotiate conversation works well at a distance, especially using a VDS (Thomas et al., 2016). This can be a strong catalyst for dialogue in terms of developing dialogic practice as a design student and practising designer (Luck, 2007).

As a final point here, there will be times where a conversation goes too far, or you have to deal with inappropriate communication. Your institution should have a policy for acceptable conduct – including online conduct – and how this relates to your subject should be part of your **induction**.

Having a guide to online communication can help here – not your institution's policy, but a subject-oriented guide to what's ok and what's not ok. At the OU we use a guide and then rely on our students to self-police, only mediating where necessary.

Some other tips:

- Be prepared for misunderstandings. Apologise immediately for any possible misunderstanding on your side – it costs nothing to apologise – then try to work what's missing in the communication.
- Correct language where you need to (yours and students) and let others do the same - it's OK to screw up; it's not OK to ignore that when it's pointed out.
- TOP TIP: instead of declaring and stating (actin as a point of authority) ask questions. "Can you see how this might be seen as aggressive by some people?"
- If you have to confront someone about inappropriate conduct, it's still better to do this privately and synchronously. Phones can still be used as … phones and, very often, having a chat is the best way forward.

You need proper support

To put this in context: at the OU we can spend **years** and **hundreds of thousands of pounds** on developing a single course. We have teams of web and software developers, administrators, systems experts, etc. to help create material. This is then brought to life by a massively distributed team across the whole UK: thousands of tutors, staff tutors, student support teams, etc.

So it feels a bit of an understatement to say: 'you cannot do this all on your own'.

You **will** need support to do a lot of the things outlined in this guide and you will not be able to do all of them in the time available to you. Have a look at everything outlined in **1. Spine**. At some point you are going to need support for nearly all the things listed there.

In particular, there are certain elements in this guide that should **only** be supported at certain levels (or scales?) and others that are far more efficiently supported at subject levels. Thinking about your support at these 'scales' is perhaps useful:

- Support best provided using complete external resources (e.g. lecture series; textbooks);
- Support best provided using existing, open resources and services (infrastructure and services, such as VLE, not outsourcing entire learning design over to someone else!);
- Support best provided at the institutional scale (i.e. that applies to all students, subject areas, etc.)
- Support best provided in subject clusters, departments, or faculties (e.g. design-specific support issues across multiple design disciplines)
- Support best provided across specific activity or content-based threads (e.g. practical or specialist provisions, such as labs, workshops, online studios, etc.)
- Support only you can provide as the intersection between your students' learning needs

If you can see a gap in this support, then it should be identified and made visible as soon as possible. If you're finding it difficult to get support then reach out to the many communities that have formed to support colleagues (See the **Distance Design Education site** for more on this.)

Online and distance are not the same

Online and distance share many attributes, but a distinction can be useful to consider if you are having difficulty starting with one or the other. Distance education has been around for centuries; online education has been around a bit less than that!

Anyone who is finding dealing with both aspects simultaneously a challenge is feeling the 'correct' response here: until you've worked with and experienced both, it's exceptionally difficult to synthesise them conceptually and practically. Even at the OU we very often don't get this quite right and rely on iteration to 'finish' a learning design. If you feel more comfortable with this, then think about:

- **Physical is still possible**. It's still possible to do physical things, albeit these are challenging right now. But even thinking about these now might be useful. For example, posing things to students can be an effective aspect of Induction in setting tone and engaging students. At the OU we still send out Welcome Packs and have a history of doing this (The Open University, 2010) to help our students get started. We also still use Postcards and even letters in our courses and tuition. We've even run a rapid prototyping design postal service (Jowers et al., 2017)
- **Start with distance concepts; not online concepts**. It's almost always the distance aspect that is most likely to affect engagement and student success. At the very least, we have a lot of knowledge and research in this area, so it makes sense to at least ensure you respond to known factors arising from distance education. Then you can consider how that intersects with the online aspects.

Retention rates and student dropout

Student dropout is generally higher in distance and online education for many reasons, some of which are listed below. This is mediated by strong student motivation and

- Distance makes it harder to spot students considering dropping out and to intervene in this (Simpson, 2013);

- The lack of proximity, engagement and presence leads to isolation (Moore 2009; Lamer 2009);
- Online can be seen as 'cheaper', less competent/rigorous, transitory and unreal (Nichols, 2010; Nash, 2005; and Ashby 2004);
- Studying at a distance is often undertaken part time and this can have a negative effect (NAO, 2007a)

Many of these studies come from open and distance learning institutions where the demographic can be very different to a traditional university. Your students may have far higher motivations to study with your institution and this is a factor in retention (regardless of quality!).

Key retention factors are introduced in this guide in order to put them into a design context and to raise awareness. Scholarship and training in this area is, however, one of those things that **you need proper support** for (and at subject and institutional scales).

Attention, activity, and engagement

Students operate at a different pace in an online setting, particularly in terms of their own pacing and engagement patterns (arguably this should be supported in traditional teaching too – it simply gets overridden by other social and behavioural patterns).

In online study, for example, smaller conceptual **chunks** of activity tend to work better than large blocks of text or 4 hour lecture videos (REF). Note that these are not 'easier'; they are simply tailored to suit cognitive attention whilst using certain interfaces to access online learning material.

Student Engagement is harder to make visible simply because it's harder to see what others are doing (Clay, 2008). It's by no means impossible, it just takes a lot more effort and conscious commitment to make it work – which is where design as a subject can actually be a benefit.

As will be explained further in **1.2, student engagement,** behaviours cannot be simply correlated to outcomes. Online activity may infer behaviours but these vary just as much as they do in a traditional setting. For example, one student may engage online every day for 2-3 hours and another may only connect once a week for 45 minutes. Both students may have similar success outcomes for a range of other reasons (you're not 'seeing' the offline activity).

In online education what we find is that **habits of engagement** are more reliable indicators of outcome. Changes to habits should emerge during learning; sudden changes in habits usually indicate a change in circumstance.

Of course, such habits have to also be introduced, practised and even developed. So how you design engagement into your course and make it visible is critical in achieving this.

Emergency versus normal teaching

As a final note, there may also be a few key differences between contemporary cohorts as a result of recent events.

If you have taught in 'emergency mode', your students are likely to have been somewhat forgiving of the changes required (although this may be less true for more advanced students nearing the end of their degree).

New cohorts are already being affected by current (May 2020) media coverage and discussions around the differences, quality and value of a higher education, often presented as an 'online education'. This duality is unhelpful and reductive, trivialising the value of well-designed learning and disrespecting the millions of students who have successfully studied online and at a distance.

To repeat, the better question is not whether one is better than the other or whether either works, rather it should be about how you might best deliver your course to new students given your constraints and conditions.

It is likely that a new cohort will expect 'new' courses and curricula designed to work at a distance, as well as have low tolerance to failures and exceptionally high expectations of quality. This may be exacerbated in regions where there exists a commoditised and transactional relationship between student, education and society (as is already being seen).

0.2 Your course contexts

Your own course and teaching context requirements are a further necessary prior consideration. Take the opportunity to restate these explicitly and this may highlight significant differences or adjustments not previously considered. For example:

- **Professional requirements**: Is your course accredited / recognised by an external body? Are their requirements still achievable?
- **Time**: What time do your students have to study? What are your expected study hours? Are students expected to study full time? Do you support part time learners? Is the general demographic of your students supportive of these time profiles?
- **Materials**: What materials will your students require? Are these still realistic to expect? Will your student cohort be disproportionately affected by such requirements?
- **Online**: Will students have internets access? What are connectivity issues? What are bandwidth limitations? Should you design for low connection / low bandwidth by default? Can you plan exceptions and special high-demand times?
- **Software**: Will students require specific software? Is this realistic? What open alternatives are available?

On the subject of learning outcomes

There is a lot of debate around combinations of words used to describe the outcomes of a design course: usually [learning, teaching, qualification, education, etc.] + [outcomes, goals, intentions, aims, etc.].

The chances are you'll already have some of these; or may even have been 'given' some. If so, then now might be a good time to review them.

In doing so, bear in mind you will need some flexibility across all aspects of your course to make appropriate changes. Switching learning modes is not a simple, linear process that maps 1:1 (see above). The mode will affect the content and vice versa and you usually have to design iteratively between these two to make it work well. As designers we understand this and the time it takes to do so. But administrators, managers or those with no experience of creating learning materials, may not be aware of it.

You will need something to guide you as you design your material and it might not always be learning goals that inspire you to do this. If you have strong Guiding Principles (see the introduction), then you may create better learning goals from those.

Hidden curriculum and Invisible learning

The experience of a design education for some students can be life-changing and, at the very least, radically affect the way they conceive of the world around them (we hope…). The **actual** learning that takes place in many design courses is rarely fully reflected in learning intentions or formal expectations. This can be both intentional and unintended, for example:

- Learning expected but not explicitly stated (hidden curriculum). For example, an expectation that students learn design process only from doing design, not from explicit learning activities or material that makes this visible.
- Learning that goes beyond course expectations (hidden learning). For example, individual students may develop interpersonal skills not explicitly required by the course but beneficial to them in order to develop other associated learning.
- Prior expected learning not explicitly stated. For example, prior IT literacies and capabilities are usually assumed rather than stated, particularly when it comes to competent use of certain software or online services, not just basic skills.

Already online

Finally, this is just a reminder that you already have a blended learning environment: your students are already online and making use of design resources, communities and services and professional practice has incorporated social and mobile media for decades (Budge, 2013; Castro, 2019).

You're might already be supporting them in doing this, whether it's links to good resources or highlighting online design tools and services. So, it can be useful to do a quick inventory of what you already do online and see what you could make even more use of.

Similarly, ask your students what they've been using. In distance learning we know that these informal support networks can be incredibly powerful supports to learning and even places of learning themselves. Actively encourage them and remember that most of these work because no teacher is present…

0.3 Useful concepts

There are some useful core concepts worth making explicit because you may not have come across them before or you simply might find them interesting. There's no right way to use this guide just as there's no ''right' design course. Starting with something interesting, intriguing or that you totally disagree with is often the best way into a design … So:

Hidden curriculum and Hidden learning
Hooks and chunks
Threshold concepts and learning
Synchronicity
Design personality
Presence
Social learning
Critical pedagogy
Constructivist / Constructionist learning

1. Spine:

In many design courses the spine is often implicit. In studio-based curricula, for example, it is often assumed that students will attend and work in certain ways in studio rather than an explicitly declared requirement. This may be supported by explicit makers (desk space allocation; desk crits; pinups; studio opening times; etc.) and the implicit and explicit working together in a proximate setting often makes the structure and spine work.

It's perhaps so obvious that we sometimes forget that these simple signs are not available at a distance. As many teachers experienced in the first 3 months of the pandemic, student confusion over what to do, when, where and how was the basic challenge.

Hence, at a distance you need to be explicit about such links and the implicit cues you use are very different.

1.0 Overall Aim and direction

This guide outlines four aspects of a curriculum 'spine' to think about in your course design: 1.1 Structure, 1.2 Personal development; 1.3 Community; and 1.4 Logistics.

Each contributes to the direction and purpose of the overriding aims for the course. Giving attention to each is important as is balancing each at different times during the course (not all will be critical at every stage).

For students they are critical:

- To orient and map out learning materials and their interrelations
- As a central point of information distribution
- To signify progress towards goals as well as overall aim
- In supporting individual learning motivations in a subject domain
- To identifying the wider context and community of design learners

Connecting the specifics of a particular activity to a wider aim can be challenging. At a distance you have the chance to map these relationships from the start – not to expect students to understand this immediately but to show it and allow such 'meta understandings' emerge.

Course Dimensions

Before considering the spine elements directly, you might find it useful to consider other factors that will influence them directly. These might be primary drivers already outlined, such as: **0.2 Your course contexts**, **0.2 learning intentions**, or **guiding principles**.

But you may also find the following qualities or properties useful (from the DDE post on Virtual Design Studios):

- Public – Private (what are the levels of sharing you need? Public? Semi-public? Semi-private? Private?)
- Social – Personal (Is the focus of the studio the group and community identity? Or is it the development of individual professionals? This changes over time, by the way)
- Formative or Summative Assessment (Is the reason for the studio primarily formative or summative assessment? Do you need to see process or outputs? Learning or achievements?)
- Output – Activity (Is the focus on the design process and activity? Or what is being produced? Constructivist-Behavioural?)
- Specialist – General (how specialised or general is the curriculum and what does that require in the studio?)
- Synchronous – Asynchronous (how synchronous do the activities need to be? Is it staged?)
- Distributed – Focused (Is it for a deliberately large set of contributors or large-scale contribution (OpenIDEO)? Or for a specific group focus? Or even individual?)
- Finite – Open-ended (Do you have specific cut-off points, such as assessments? Or is it a continuous studio (such as DS106)?)

1.1 Structure

This is the shape of what, when and how things will be done in your course. If the spine is the map, then the structure is the map grid, legend and all the key features and landmarks that make up your course.

It answers the following questions:

> **What** are students to do?
> **Where** will they find this?
> **When** will they do it?

These questions are central to any course but, at a distance, being clear, precise and articulate in answering them is critical.

Useful in maintaining this clarity is to:

- Have a single source of information that is easy to find and identify. Encourage students to bookmark or have some way of getting to that place.
- Have regular communication to re-orient students, clarify anything, and to generally signal progression using the structure.
- Identify other critical (i.e. essential) places of learning and how these integrate with the course overall: e.g. VDS, social media spaces; library;

The structure organises (and is signalled by) the material, activities and outputs in your course.

Your structure will depend very much on your course needs but implicit structures in physical studio need to be made explicit at a distance. For example, you might think about this as an explicitly described 'input-output' process, where set material, activity, skill practice, etc is the

input and what the student produces and shares/submits is the output. A large part of design learning activities is working through how inputs/outputs will be achieved by students.

For example, you might have a core theory element you repeat regularly in your course. You give students material to assimilate, some practise exercises and then a short activity to try out in a design process. Each of these needs to be supported by the structure of your course: core theory might be hosted on the VLE; practise exercises are shared as sketchbook uploads; design activity is an end of week virtual pinup in the VDS.

Hooks and Chunks

This would make a great new detective series on Netflix, but, sadly, these are informal terms for online learning design techniques to help engagement.

Hook comes from an advertising technique that aims to attract, engage and capture user attention. In an educational setting, **hooks** are a useful way to link your learning design to students' intrinsic motivations. This can be as simple as identifying some tantalising end goal (e.g. 'you, too, could create work like this…') or simple and immediate (e.g. 'if you turn up to studio, you will feel more confident').

Chunks are bits of learning material divided according to some suitable size, complexity and identity of individual parts of your learning design.

It may sound simple (even trivial), but dividing your material into human-readable 'bits' helps students – particularly in a primarily online setting. And I really mean 'bits' here – an informal term that's useful rather than analytical.

Hence, this will depend on the context of the material and is not necessarily time-bounded: a short design activity can take either 15 minutes or 3 months, but it still may be perceived as a chunk. Similarly, this will change as students develop: guided time suggestions might be appropriate at early stages whilst later stages may use more general project planning terms.

Use appropriate chunks for your course and consider using general terms to chunk by:

- Time: e.g. a 30 minute practice; half-day studio; 2-3 day mini-project
- Activity: e.g. sketching; idea creation; research;
- Concept: e.g. research method; idea analysis; etc.

Note: even if you do use informal terms, you should still have your own idea of the time it should take, either from your own practice or previous experience. Then, add to this whatever normal range you see in your typical student cohorts, as well as an extra pinch of time for current contexts. This final timing should inform your learning design.

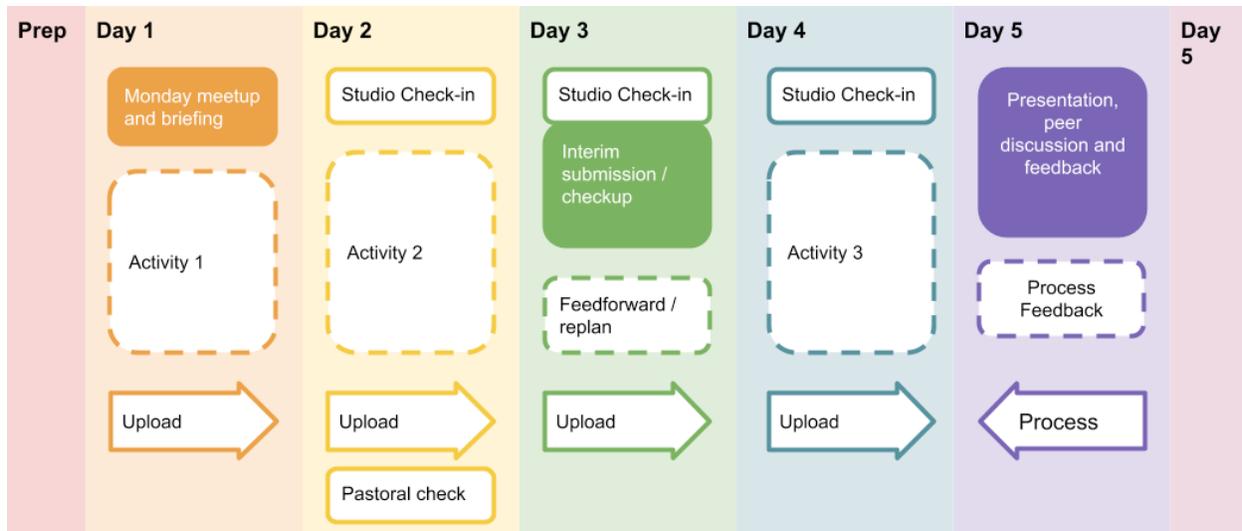Have a look at **The Chunky Studio** recipe for an example of using chunks in a week:

Figure 3 Diagram structure from The Chunky Studio recipe.

Threshold learning and concepts

A threshold concept is a key idea critical (or even a gateway) to other concepts in a subject area. Design, generally, has a number of threshold concepts in addition to those in specific subject areas and sub-domains. For example, working with uncertainty as a necessary condition of the design process; or

Rather than list what these might be (there might be some debate…), it's perhaps more useful to think about what these might be in your course based on what you already know: with which concepts have students had difficulty in the past? Which concepts are pivotal to later ones? Etc.

Once you acknowledge these, decide whether it's a good idea to highlight them or whether doing so makes it harder for students.

For example, uncertainty in the design process is a threshold concept we identify at the OU and we find it useful to highlight and note that every single designer has felt the panic of uncertainty! The expectation of students is to try the methods we present to them to approach this concept and see what works from them. The threshold will be reached when students feel they have some (ideally personal and constructivist) set of ways of dealing with it and can demonstrate this in their design process.

As a counter example, some threshold concepts might be better implicit. For example, it could be argued that the preconception of design as only operational skill (e.g. using Photoshop) is also a threshold concept. But it's arguably less useful to raise this directly compared to demonstrating it to students directly. This threshold may be reached when the student recognises the value in cognition **as well as** behavioural skills and they are even able to express this in their personal development.

Finally, it's worth noting that many threshold concepts are non-trivial problems themselves: they may not have simple resolutions and it's difficult to design a curriculum that guarantees that a

threshold will be reached at point X in a course. Recognise this by iterating key and threshold concepts throughout your course, planning them as a journey rather than a point in time.

Synchronicity

Teaching synchronously or asynchronously is a useful binary for most learning activities. Synchronous activity is where you will be present or available at the same time as students, such as in tuition events, crits, project reviews, etc. Asynchronous activity is student activity that doesn't depend on you or others being there at that same time.

One effect of the recent online pivot has been the reporting of higher levels of fatigue from synchronous online meetings. The desire to be in synchronous contact with students is understandable for many of the reasons outlined in this guide. But to reduce fatigue, stress and dependency on technology, think about how much of your course really needs to actually be synchronous – how much can you flip to **0.1 learning, not teaching**?

At the OU, our courses are designed for it to be possible for a student to study 100% synchronously. We provide opportunities for synchronous tuition (perhaps around 10-15% of the course) and recommend this for most students. We allow the alternative because we have a specific need to meet particular student needs.

A final critical point about timing is that synchronicity is not only about the immediate, present moment in time: students can be working on the same project at the 'same time' without doing the exact same activities at the 'same time'. This refers to a longer period of synchronicity, perhaps for a project or period of course time.

This type of synchronicity is critical in keeping a learning community together, especially in design where we depend on social learning taking place between students working towards the same goal. It could be argued that this 'semi-synchronous social learning' is key to social learning in the studio. Thinking in terms of semi-synchronous time periods also allows you to be a bit more flexible with purely synchronous events and even key dates. This can allow students to catch up or work ahead within a certain boundary of flexibility, which can help both you and students plan time and resources.

As an example of semi-synchronous learning designs, see the recipes **The Blackboard studio model** and **The Chunky studio**.

1.2 Personal development

Motivation plays a significant role in student retention and success at a distance (Wang et al., 2013a; Simpson, 2013; Alarcon and Edwards, 2013; Wang et al., 2008), with personal (intrinsic) motivation tending to be slightly more sustainable that extrinsic motivations in creative education (Lepper and Greene, 1973).

This vertical element answers the question:

> **Why** am I doing this?

Engagement

Student **engagement** is a significant and strong predictor of student success and engagement (Allen and Lester, 2012). In a distance and online setting, of course, it can be difficult to gauge how engaged a student is. Hence we tend to employ proxies to assess this, such as student persistence or **time on task**, where a student simply attends to the course material (Chickering and Gamson, 1987b).

This can be measured directly and assessed analytically through website use, interactions, etc. But it is only through interpretation and understanding of student patterns and behaviours that this data makes any sense. For example, some students may have low online activity, others very high and both groups can do very well. But the stronger predictor of success is how regularly students engage (Cho & Shen, 2013).

It is critical not to ignore indirect activity as well: students reading forums and engaging in other 'passive' behaviours are still active and this is a significant mode of learning online and at a distance. Originally theorised by Lave and Wenger for traditional learning, it became 'listening in' online (Rogoff et al., 2003) or the 'apprenticeship of listening' in design (Shulman, 2005), and finally in online design (Cennamo and Brandt, 2012).

It can be relatively simple to initiate and encourage this type of activity and a top tip is to do this regularly and predictably. Have a look at **Recipe: Motivating students working remotely** for examples.

Expectation

There can be differences between student expectation of a subject and the reality of what a course offers regardless of mode. At worst, this can lead to cognitive dissonance and affect student persistence and engagement (Grebennikov and Shah, 2012). Many design educators will be aware of the preconceptions students bring to studio (e.g. around creativity; what it is designers 'do'; the tensions between learning software and developing thinking; etc.).

This can be exacerbated in an online setting where students cannot 'see' alternative practices or the habits and actions that lead to good design. Hence, making the process of design visible is useful, whether this is through case studies, examples, interviews with designers, your own example, and, of course, making student processes visible too. Another tip here is to make student work visible **across** cohorts to highlight **expectations** (as well as signal **direction**).

Design personality

In his paper on distance design courses in Germany, (Lanig, 2019) refers to **Gestalterpersonlichkiet**: the personality of the designer. This can be expressed through their work, outputs, processes, attitudes, interactions with others, and many other qualities. Lanig's major finding here is that it is no less important or present at a distance and that its development requires a longitudinal approach, just as it would in a traditional setting.

In design education we are interested in the factors that develop a student's design personality and how they then lead to a student's output and work. There is very little work on how these specifically develop and relate to final work, although we know that what novice students value in an VDS doesn't align with what 'experts' pay attention to (Lotz et al., 2018)! But current thinking is that by making the links between design personality and design 'products' more explicit, some students will engage more readily with this as a general approach to reflective and professional practice. This in turn acts as a significant, intrinsic motivation to engage in learning.

Transformation

Some designerly attributes are rarely explicitly expressed because they are difficult to describe in particular (expected) ways: it's far easier to put "I can use Photoshop" on a CV than to articulate how an affective state of mind can lead to far greater divergence of creative ideas.

This is slowly changing as more contributors move towards design competencies as a way to articulate the value of a design education (Design Council, 2015). But we need to be even more confident and articulate about the values of a design education, starting with our own communication of these to students to enable them to communicate them too. Here are a few examples to think about:

- **Attitudes**: the mindsets and ways of thinking designers bring to situations;
- **Behaviours**: the habits of interaction between things and thinking that designers engage in;
- **Approaches**: the ways of making progress that designers exhibit, unlike many other disciplines;
- **Competencies**: the capacities designers have to apply skills, abilities to situations;
- [What would you add for your discipline?]

Different students may wish these to articulate these in different ways and how they are communicated will also vary depending on the purpose of communication (e.g. employment; personal website; professional portfolio; etc.).

Developing the means to articulate clearly their own values as designers in a range of different ways can be developed throughout a course design and assist with motivation and direction.

Pastoral support

Attention to pastoral care and support at a distance is expressed and negotiated in different ways. In a traditional setting you might have many short discussions with students about wellbeing and how they feel. In an online setting this immediacy is harder to achieve, and students are often forced into either making such issues very visible (often writing them down), or not acting on them at all.

This is a critical difference and you have to be aware that there will be far fewer signs of support need. Hence, at a distance you have to proactively support students. It's not enough to have an open door – you have to proactively go to students' doors and ask them how they're doing

(Baxter, 2010; Bennison, 2010). This is similar to inverting the teaching model and it's often overlooked in many distance learning designs.

Having a really simple habit or method you use to check on ALL students is useful here. This could be a weekly check on online engagement (e.g. logins; VDS use; etc.) or a weekly synchronous tutorial or studio check-in.

Whatever you use, be careful of your own prejudices! How often and how intensively a student engages online varies significantly and cannot simply be correlated to success: how regularly they engage in their **personal** pattern of behaviour does correlate (Jones et al., 2020). Don't approve intervention and contact as a deficit – something negative to be correct – try to always approach it as a positive encounter and opportunity for tuition (Nichols, 2010b).

What you should look out for are **changes** in student behaviour. These are very often the single strongest predictors of student disengagement. Of course, there may be many reasons for such disengagement and not all of them will be negative. But if you are in regular contact with your students you will **know** what's happening or will be able to follow up on unexplained changes.

Finally, it may be uncomfortable to think about, but you and your students will need exceptional support at some point, particularly crisis mental health and wellbeing support. Students and staff may be aware of support in a traditional setting, but this may be less visible at a distance. This can lead to breakdown in support.

In summary

- Proactively contact your students to support them: It's better to check and be wrong than not check.
- Regularly check your student progress using a simple habit or method (check-in; online activity; etc.).
- Pay attention to changes in student behaviour: these are almost always signals of some kind.
- Know what your standard and emergency support routes are, particularly for crisis management. You don't need to know these in detail, you just need to know where to go if you need it.
- Remember, if you are not a trained counsellor, it's usually a good idea to leave the expert support to those who can provide professional help.

Reflection

Reflection has a bit of mixed reputation. If you've ever got to the end of a training course and been asked to "reflect on what you have just learned" you'll know that superficial reflection can be painful.

But in design it's a critical cognitive 'switch' that's necessary for a designer to recognise what it is in their practice that's valuable.

For many designers this is challenging, and we very often do this implicitly and without realising it consciously. But in order to change and develop our practice we have to 'destabilise the

system', as Schön famously observed, by becoming aware of what we do and then changing or reinforcing it.

The trick to this is perhaps to present it as a designer's activity rather than an academic one and many courses do this already. But many courses may also have relied on this reflection taking place synchronously in a studio setting, perhaps as part of a conversation. Your own course may continue this practice and use regular synchronous checkpoints to do this.

But capturing reflective practice asynchronously (and at a distance) is another matter because it requires students to (usually) record it in a format that is perhaps removed from the reflection itself. For example, we might interrupt a student's design process by getting them to stop and reflect. This interruption may or may not be a good thing…

Hence, finding ways your students can evidence their reflection in a quick, simple and effective way is important. This will depend on your subject area and can also vary according to the stage a student is at.

At the OU we often use short, checkpoint-like reflections to help students make progress in their design work whilst also reflecting and making that reflection visible. This way, we reframe reflection as 'making things visible that are useful to help your design project work'. Put this way, it becomes more of a part of the process than an artificial adjunct necessary for proof of learning…

One of the simplest forms we use is:

- What was good/bad? (things)
- What went well/not so well? (process)
- What did you like/not like? (personal)
- What would you do differently next time? (projective feedforward)

And it's usually this last question that is the most effective one and could be used on its own since it requires to students to imagine a change, hence necessarily relating to past and future events.

1.3 Community

The chances are that your course will depend on creating some kind of peer interaction and, ideally, a community of practice in your student cohort.

This answers the question:

> **Who** am I becoming and **who** am I learning with ?

Social connection is even more important and potentially valuable in an online setting. It's no coincidence that the major internet services that have emerged over the past decades have been based on social interaction and drivers.

Regardless of the medium or mode, people prefer to connect rather than be isolated. We have evolve, and are driven, to connect as a function of learning, too (Dehaene, 2020). Even people who are less likely to connect socially, will still find value in being part of a community.

One way of looking at this as a distance educator is as a massive potential of intrinsic student motivation!

Presence

In the studio, an individual's presence is more than just being there: it includes what you do, the way you behave, how you engage with others, how you respond to things, what you prefer, etc. This is also true in an online setting, albeit with the usual condition that it can be much harder to signal and observe the cues that reveal presence (Kear, 2010).

But, one again, this is where we (designers) have a massive advantage – design is about producing things and both the production, and the thing produced, signal presence. This can then be built on and developed, such that, from personal presence it can move to social presence and lead to a Community of Practice emerging (Lotz et al., 2015; Jones et al., 2020). In doing so, your students are also developing their **design personality**.

It's a good idea to encourage your students to signal their presence as soon as you can – most will do this without much encouragement. Encourage them into the habit of sharing their work (at all stages) with other students, regularly, openly, and with a purpose (even if this purpose is nothing more than 'look what I made'). Even better, make such sharing a regular and habitual part of any design processes you use.

All of this assists with a particular type of presence: social presence (Gunawardena and Zittle, 1997), where the interactions between students become as important as the signs of individual or cognitive presence.

Social learning

Learning from other people, by watching, imitating, comparing, etc., is one of the most common ways of learning and is perhaps central to design education. This is formally known as social comparison (Festinger, 1954; Gilbert et al., 1995) and it can be most easily applied by making student work visible to peers, just as would happen in a traditional studio. Using a VDS to achieve this is a ready-made learning pattern, whether you do this using a bespoke VDS or using social media or professional portfolio site. Have a look at the **Virtual Design Studios** post for more on this.

In design, the subjectivity of the discipline is very often mediated by socially agreed and defined definitions of creativity, acceptability, and quality (Lloyd and Jones, 2013), hence this can be actively applied to cohorts of students in your course. It will also (hopefully) develop as your students progress and mature in the subject.

As it does, a Community of Practice can emerge (Lave and Wenger, 1991), where the shared purpose, identity or interest of the group is recognised and even defined. You can further encourage this by example – by taking part in the community yourself and inserting signs and

signals relating to your subject area. Even simple interventions, such as using subject-specific terms or relating to subject examples, can make a difference here. You can think of this as the learning community becoming a professional community, or perhaps a bridge the two, as identified by (Brandt et al., 2013).

Atmosphere

Atmosphere is defined here to mean how aspects of **tone and character** are 'brought to life' in your course. Practically, this is the tone and character of your actions: what you do, the language you use, the type of examples you give, or how you respond to and interact with other actions.

For example, if someone posts a copyright or non-cleared image how will you respond? At an early stage of learning you may do so informally and use it as a chance to reinforce teaching around intellectual property and law. At later stages, you may adopt a more formal approach to act as more of a warning.

The atmosphere your course requires will depend on the course, your own predispositions (and biases), and how that interacts with your student cohorts. At a distance, the usual basic rules apply: make this visible; be as consistent as you can; and avoid dissonance between what you say and how you say it.

Groupwork

The dreaded G word…

It's first of all worth disambiguating a few things here: collaboration, cooperation, coordination (Pollard, 2005) and I'd also add coincidence.

Firstly, true collaboration is relatively rare in professional design, with cooperation the more common form of groupwork. So to expect student to collaborate without teaching them how (never mind at a distance) is perhaps a bit unfair.

One inviolate ground rule: Don't award marks or rank by groups. It makes no sense. The group did not enrol in your course and the group will not take on board the learning outcomes. By all means assess groups: provide feedback, analysis, ask questions, encourage reflection, etc.

In a social setting we (in fact nearly all mammals) are very acutely aware of **relative** fairness. A lot of complaints arise from this perception and if you have summative assessment using grading and/or ranking then you are engaging in a competitive comparison of students (whether you intend it or not). Avoid this by awarding and assessing **individual contributions** to groupwork using appropriately design assessment that elicits this. Or, set out clear criteria for assessment of the group that takes account of the visibility of perceptions of relative fairness (good luck with that…).

The exception to this rule is if your course for a degree in groupwork. In that case, go for it and all the very best.

The other way to go about this is not to mention it. This is how I (a less than enthusiastic maths student) learned calculus at the OU – it wasn't mentioned until I'd been doing for long enough.

Start with coincidence. Getting students to realise they are part of a larger group of students and even a community is a good first goal. A good way to start this is by getting them to do things that lead to 'natural' **social learning** opportunities. This introduces the fact that it's valuable to work in a creative community as a designer and design student.

Then, extend this to cooperation by getting students to realise the value of actively using other students, whether this is to gather feedback in the VDS or to simply bounce ideas off during an ideas session. Here, there is an explicit use of others in the design process – not as group members but as 'useful additions' to individual design processes and thinking. This is not as selfish as it sounds – the value gained is reciprocated and this reciprocation is recognised.

Next, you can give a bit of coordination a try. Here, student work can remain discrete and carried out on an individual basis. But extend this by making some part of it link to other students' work. The trick is that this link shouldn't be dependent or in any way prevent other students making progress (not the easiest thing to manage). An example might be a mood board or precedent wall, where the collective contribution adds value to some wider design process.

Finally, when you're all (students and tutors) ready for it and limbered up, you can give collaboration a try. This is where students are genuinely working together (with, besides and over the top of one another) in order to meet some objective. Making the objective the focus of the learning design is usually a good idea and keeping the collaboration to small groups – even just 2-3 students – can make the signalling of failing collaboration slightly easier.

At a distance, coordination and collaboration usually require very strong drivers and structures to keep things going. These can be structures in the learning activity (e.g. hand-ins; updates; tuition points; etc) or they can be organisational (e.g. a strong lead personality; identifying group roles; etc.)

Suffice to say, the problems you might expect to see in a traditional setting will be there in an online setting. As noted, your biggest ally here is the fact that implicit things have to be made explicit at a distance and this very often makes other things (such as individual group contributions) explicit too.

1.4 Logistics

It's boring and sometimes even dull, but the practicalities matter very much at a distance. In a traditional studio you can rely on walls, roof, gravity, and other taken for granted spatial and temporal boundaries. At a distance you can't.

> **How** will students conduct and be supported in their learning

As well as directly support the questions in **1.1 Structure**:

> **Where** will they find this?

When will they do it?

General Institutional support

To answer these questions you will need practical and institutional support, including:

> **Academic systems and procedures**: assessment, submissions, enrolment, and all the administration and quality assurance that goes with these.
> **Technical systems**: your personal technical needs (computer; connection; etc); institutional learning infrastructure (Virtual Learning Environment (VLE)); Virtual Design Studio (VDS);
> **Student support**: academic (exams, policy, guidance, etc.), administrative (finance, enrolment, etc.), accessibility (alternative modes, adjustments, guidance, etc.)
> **Pastoral support**: student / teacher support systems, procedures and policies (see 1.2 above).
> **Accessibility support**: general medium and content accessibility, adjustments processes, and alternative formats and

If you have no choice in the core systems you have to use (e.g. LMS or VLE), then make sure you know how to use it to get the best out of it. In particular, know what support is available from your institution to get the best use out of the VLE. If none is available, tell them experts have said that not supporting staff properly in key areas such as this can lead to lower student success rates at a distance (Gibbs, 2010) (Clay, 2008)

Similarly, know the limitations of your VLE: what it can't do, what it does badly, and what's difficult about using it for both you and students. If you need additional/external services (e.g. social media tie-ins; VDS; etc.) then identify these at the earliest opportunity and make good use of open and shared resources to design educators (see the **Distance Design Education Resources** page for more on this).

Many design courses make use of multiple and/or blended modes and services, such as social media services, proprietary or domain-based online portfolios, or an online studio (which can also be blended). If you decide to go with this option then try solutions that work for your course **and** students together. Changing and adapting this as you need is also fine if everyone is involved in the decision-making.

If there are gaps in this support then they do need to be addressed and, at the very least, made visible to colleagues and line managers.

Accessibility

Accessibility is very often forgotten about until it's too late to apply it embedded and holistically. in anything other than a superficial way. This is perhaps even harder whilst under pressure to deliver content in a hurry. Hence, the first step is to make use of systems and approaches that automatically ensure accessibility without additional work.

For example, your VLE should (ideally) fully support some standard(s) for accessibility , such as [W3C's Web Content Accessibility Guidelines 2.1(WCAG 2.1)](#) (see 1.4 Logistics for more on this).

By extension, content you produce on your VLE should also be accessible and, where possible, available in multiple formats and modes to support a further range of accessibility needs.

None of this needs to be difficult or technically challenging and it should be expected and supported as a matter of course.

Check you are supported to provide:

- Basic online design should be generally accessible and able to flex to suit alternative font types, font sizes, colour contrasts, colour modes, etc.
- Material formats are screen / device readable; even better, have alternative readable formats;
- Backwards compatibility and broad spectrum device compatibility (find out what the oldest hardware / software combination your students are using)

In addition to automated considerations, the content you produce should consider accessibility as you write. For example:

- Your layout and learning design structure is well described: page titles, headings, sub-headings, all make sense and contribute to an overall understanding of the content;
- Images all have alt descriptions; that these are actually useful, contextualised descriptions;

If you are designing a completely new course then take these principles further and adopt a universal design approach. By designing with accessibility measures as a dimension of course design (rather than as add-ons or later adjustments) you can radically rethink what accessible materials can be.

Even better, thinking of accessibility as an aspect of your learning community can help you reframe it completely as something for **all** students. This can have a significant impact on widening participation generally.

As a final point, remember that some of your students will have unseen issues and indicators. They may appear to be coping and doing OK but they may also be struggling and suffering. Some conditions even prohibit making these issues visible.

At a distance this will be harder to identify because students are likely to come into contact with fewer numbers of staff hence fewer opportunities to observe indicators and offer assistance. Like Pastoral care above, being proactive in your support is essential and very few institutions recognise the additional resource load on individual teaching staff to meet these needs.

Team teaching

As noted above, you can't do this on your own, you need institutional support but you also need a bit of friendly advice too. Traditional teaching often relies on individual teachers writing

materials in isolation and delivering them in ways that can 'hide' the ad hoc nature of this process.

Many of the elements outlined in this guide are significant resource challenges and should not be the responsibility of individuals. It's also very inefficient to have hundreds of individual teachers creating the similar material. Have a look back at the section **You need proper support** for a list of 'scales' of working that might help improve fantasy workloads …

Even working in small groups or 2-3 can significantly reduce individual workload and make certain activities much easier. For example, making design decisions can be significantly improved if there are 3 people contributing ideas. This will also significantly reduce your own isolation, something that tends to get forgotten when we focus only on student isolation!

Critical pedagogy

OK, I'm being optimistic here by suggesting that you'll have time to do all of the above (and below) and ALSO engage critically with your teaching practice. But it can be practically useful to wonder whether what you're doing is useful or has any purpose (without getting too nihilistic about it).

Even engaging with some critical pedagogy can still be worth the time taken in order to get you thinking about your own practice and work. You might not make explicit use of it but it can, and most likely will, affect your thinking.

Have a read of James Brown's post: **From denial to acceptance: a turning point for design studio in architecture education** to get started!

2. Induction:

Induction, here, means far more than an introduction.

Design education relies on working with and developing cultures, attitudes and competencies as much as content. Again, this is often implicit in studio and proximate practice – particularly where related to a specific profession.

At a distance, research shows that this has to be managed particularly carefully because students are particularly sensitive to induction. There is a clear link between induction and student success in distance learning (Hutchings, 2011; 2013), so getting it right is worth the time and effort.

Before we start, induction is often framed as a way of doing work to get 'up to' a starting point, i.e. dealing with student deficiencies (NAO, 2007b). Far better is to reframe this as a positive event and as a part of the course they are probably quite excited about starting.

Never present this as a remedial activity or an additional thing to do (think about it: if you're saying a student isn't ready, is it really a good idea to make them do even more work when they're already at a disadvantage?)

2.1 Identity

Your course will have an identity (whether you intended it or not) and its worth thinking about this explicitly before you really get into creating content and activities. How do you want your course to come across? Friendly? Fun? Professional? Rigorous? What are the characteristics of your existing course? What do students pick up on?

You might also find it useful to refer to the dimensions outlines in 1.0 Spine above. Many of these relate directly to how a course aims students to engage with it.

Tone and character

Tone and character are the ways in which your curriculum is expressed, communicated and portrayed by itself. This can range from the language and words used right up to the shape of the curriculum itself.

For example, an introductory course may use informal language and adopt a very structured approach to learning activities. A final year course may have a more formal language with a very open structure.

The reason tone and character has been placed here instead of in the larger elements is that it is strongly signalled in your materials. Whether you like it or not, your writing has a style and tone! The type of images, video or media you use in material contributes to the atmosphere of your course. And students will read it and pick up on these things.

The intention here is not to suggest what your tone or character should be – it is simply to draw your attention to the fact of it. Unless you explicitly want cognitive dissonance as part of your curriculum design, avoid a contradiction between your content and tone.

Think about:

- Language use: informal, formal, technical, deliberately vague
- Representation in gendered/ableist/neurotypical language use;
- Representation in case study examples and use;
- Representation in images and image purpose;
- Visual language and identity: We don't always get the choice, of course…

Establishing your **atmosphere** early, during induction, is a critical way to make clear your intentions and expectations. Tone, atmosphere, and character are also cues that give students 'permission' to do certain things (or not). If you engender an inclusive, open tone, you are signalling to students that this is OK in their behaviours (and maybe even expected). Similarly, a more formal tone may signal yet different expectations and interactions.

This is one of the most important things to get right from the start because the initial interactions will have a lasting effect on students' perceptions of the course and their interactions. Decide what your course character is and use that to engage with students right at the start.

2.2 Induction

The early first moments (even seconds) of a student's interaction with a course will have as significant an impact as a traditional student leaving home and studying at university for the first time. In these moments, a student will be welcomed or put off; intrigued or intimidated; inspired or dejected.

Planning your induction with this in mind is no bad thing. Each and every activity and thing a student has to do will (implicitly and explicitly) contribute to their perception of the course and, in particular, it's quality (see **0.1: Emergency versus normal teaching**).

At the OU, we talk about induction being a ramp into education and that this ramp starts off very shallow to allow a smooth transition. We also try to think of induction as something that doesn't just happen at the start: inducting into ways of working can be a continuous process and it's often a bad idea to try and induct everything at the same time (especially right at the start).

For our stage 1 course, we encourage students to be active designers from the start and engage students in quick, motivating activities to get them started. Each aspect of these activities is considered to avoid any single part of it being too 'steep' an induction ramp. We then try to build on the energy and atmosphere this induction creates to induct students into early habits of working and predictable structures and patterns of online learning.

Higher education

Unfortunately, very few students are actively taught how to learn in many undergraduate school systems. So much so that we even have OpenLearn course on learning: **Learning how to Learn**

The transition between school and university is a significant step academically, behaviourally, and socially. Each of these step-changes has an effect on student learning and how well they perform academically. Studies show that this is particularly the case for students who may be the first in their social group to go to university.

Hopefully your institution will have support systems and material to assist this transition. But there is a case for contextualising this to design practice particularly as a way of supporting the transition further. The expectations we have of students as both novice designers and design students are worth communicating. Helping them visualise where they are going and what they might end up being afterwards can help – particularly if this is based on case studies of actual students.

Distance education

Perhaps unsurprisingly, very few students know how to be effective online learners. Research shows that students do better if they learn how to learn in online learning environments (Brown, 2013; Cho & Shen, 2013). This may sound utterly obvious, but it's often missed: to be a distance design student, you need to learn how to do this.

Again, the OU has an Open Course aimed at general **distance** students too: **Am I ready to be a distance learner?**

Contextualising this for design students is slightly harder in that there aren't too many precedents available. But it might be worth emphasising the fact that a lot of contemporary design practice is very often mediated by distance practices or blended with online elements. Even traditional non-digital practices usually have an online blend, whether to highlight work, maintain a professional presence or simply to connect with other practitioners (Budge, 2013; Castro, 2019).

It may even be that you redesign your course for exactly this type of blended practice from the start, inducting students into an even wider community of practice that's already doing distance and online...

Technology

Technology 'self-efficacy' is known to correlate with student success in distance learning (Wang et al., 2013b). This also means the opposite is true: students with lower experience and confidence levels in using technology can be put off study or have negative study experiences.

Check your assumptions about prior student IT knowledge: you may find that you have assumed your students know more than they actually do.

Even better, incorporate some basic IT literacy into your course. As mentioned, don't present this deficit learning: reframe it to your subject area and, whilst you cover aspects of 'professional design IT competency', you can also cover some basic literacies too.

Again, the OU has a course from that (albeit a generic one, not specific to design): **Digital Literacy: succeeding in a digital world**

Social and interpersonal

In addition to IT skills-based issues, it's important to induct students into social and interpersonal behaviours too. How students conduct themselves online matters professionally and can also be a matter of legal and institutional concern.

Your institution probably has an online policy document that no one has read but there might still be good stuff in there that your course could contextualise for design students (I'm looking at you here, plagiarism and copyright… Do you know your University's policy on the IP status of Photoshop Brushes?)

3. The course

3.1 Assimilative Content

Assimilative content refers generally to material transmitted to students who are then expected to do something with this (assimilate) as part of a learning design. Traditionally, this means lectures, books, and other information that we expect students to make some use of.

What you need to change will obviously depend on what you already have in terms of content. Many institutions may have already moved from lecture-based to flipped classroom approaches. Yet others may have set material they already use: core reading; sets of multimedia; library and resources.

Multiple formats

If you're going to invert your model from teaching to learning (see 0.1Some key differences) then multiple modes and formats will help reduce misconception and misunderstanding, giving students far more choice autonomy over their own learning.

This can be time consuming but there are a few tricks to bear in mind:

- Write once / publish many times. Try to create content in formats that can be read using multiple devices and across multiple modes. For example, online content that is accessible across platforms and devices can be created in most modern VLE platforms. This should be supported by your institution.
- Use open resources. You don't have to write it all yourself. If good material exists elsewhere then make use of it, but remember that it is the 'bring to life' in your course is the real value to students…

For more on this, see the **OU's OpenLearn course on OER** and have a look at the **Resources page on the DDE website**.

Chunks

Chunks were mentioned in **1.1 Hooks and Chunks** and are important as a useful concept in online learning, where cognitive attention (a critical cognitive mechanism in any learning (Dehaene, 2020)) via a digital medium can be difficult to maintain. What students are engaging with are devices, interfaces and services; not just your content. This is often ignored when designing content or comparing distance to online learning.

Breaking your content up into conceptual chunks will make it easier for students (and you!) to see the 'shape' of your overall content and allow you to focus on alternative or additional ways of presenting each chunk, particularly useful for critical or **threshold concepts**.

In design we have a huge advantage in that our students will be expecting to engage in different ways of working: activity, skills development, projects, research, etc. In fact, some design processes could be conceived as a series of chunks that contribute to a project. This is how we do it at the OU: chunks build up to methods; method contribute to projects. The variety of types of activity in each chunk helps students maintain a reasonable balance of cognitive attention and, in some cases, allows them flexibility to choose which approaches they feel ready to make use of.

Make use of your own design experience to help with this – it's very rare that any part of what we do as designers can't be reconceived in some other way (e.g. an analysis task can be approached purely academically or can take a more grounded approach).

Again, have a look at the **Recipe: Studio model: The Chunky studio** for an outline example of chunking.

3.2 Activities

We have another massive advantage in design education when it comes to flipping from teaching to learning – we already expect our students to learn by doing and experience (formally, active learning and experiential learning).

One of the reasons specifying learning outcomes in design is difficult is that what each student learns is personal to them and based on their experience. But that's also an incredibly rich source of learning to be shared too.

So, take advantage of that as an outline activity design: get your students to learn design by being designers, just as you would in a studio. The critical difference in a distance and online setting is that you won't be there to unpick 'bits' of the uncertainty (if you set a global design challenge expecting 27 experiential learning outcomes, don't be surprised when students contact you all the time). One way to work around this is to chunk activity just as you would content or skills. For example, set activities that have a central experiential outcome, such as:

- Approaching complexity in design briefs/problems
- Dealing with decision-making as part of a design process
- Responding to user/client/peer feedback

Each of these is a non-specific learning outcome – you may not define what approach a student should take in approaching complexity, but you then chunk these by giving suggested tools and have students learn something useful from their application.

Again, it's perhaps obvious when it's put like that, but it does matter to be able to spell this out for you and students (and university colleagues, too).

At the OU, using short activities is key to our approach by chunking them and then putting them together to construct design methods. Building in this way retains ensures that we are not dictating methods, processes or preferences but are, instead, expecting students to make sense of, apply, and evaluate activities as part of a broader design process and experience.

Making it visible

Making experiential learning visible is another challenge.

Firstly, getting students to see their experience as potential knowledge can be a challenge (they might believe knowledge exists only in books or lectures…). Many of the cognitive processes associated with design seem 'common sense' or 'obvious' or even 'mysterious and unknown'. Making a choice between options can seem 'just like picking one' or (even worse) so subjective that you don't know why you prefer something.

Getting students to realise that each of these is in itself a valuable cognitive activity is critical. The first step is to make it visible to them and then to value it explicitly as part of the process. You can incorporate this into your activity design by having points at which you get students to reflect on what they're doing (see **Reflection** for tips on this).

Secondly, getting students to make learning visible for assessment can be a further challenge. As Lawson says of the design process: "there is not a lot of action to be seen and what is there cannot be readily understood" (Lawson, 2005 p.216). Hence, convincing students that there is something to see is the first challenge; having them represent this in some way to make it visible is the next.

In the studio this is also often unpicked over sketches, through discussion and other semi-formal processes. Articulating the design process explicitly can be difficult and even feel quite unnatural. But there are major benefits to doing this:

- it forces the articulation of the design process;
- it highlights aspects of the design process as they relate to design outcomes;
- it allows learning, feedback and assessment of the design process to take place;
- iteration of the previous point makes visible the development (or otherwise) of a student's design practice

To make the design process visible, many of the ways you might do this in a traditional setting will apply at a distance and online:

- Through discussion and synchronous check-ins
- Using design diaries and sketchbooks
- Having design reports or other formal ways of recording process
- Using design process or even business management tools
- Using a hybrid or mix of the above

At the OU we use concept mapping software to help with this, asking students to record and represent their process using images, text, and whatever other media they feel they need to communicate. This allows assessment of this process to take place and gives tutors the ability to relate specific process elements to particular design outcomes. This, in turn, allows feedforward on future design processes using specific actions rather than feedback on the product with less tangible links to process.

See the post **Making the design process visible** for more on this.

3.3 Skills

This is where we might get to one of those boundaries of what's possible in distance education: how far can implicit and tacit embodied knowledge be transferred online and at a distance – particularly in embodied practice?

I'll repeat that I'm not aware of any really good answers that really explore this question meaningfully. If anyone else is, then please get in touch (derek.jones@open.ac.uk).

It's worth disambiguating some of this for practical reasons to help you think about whether it's critical to your course.

'Transfer' is not necessarily what is actually happening in these contexts: i.e. a literal transfer of one person's knowledge to another.

Firstly, there may be knowledge the expert has that is 'recreated' in the learner: that it is the learner who constructs their own way of achieving the same outcome. In this case the learner is as central to the process as the teacher and it is very often the dialogue (verbal and otherwise) that mediates these two.

Then there is knowledge the expert has that is closer to a traditional transfer: where the student is attempting to replicate the experts understanding of the knowledge. In this case, the learner may (for example) observe and copy some specific action or way of seeing demonstrated by the teacher.

Both of these modes can be used at a distance and where one or the other is predominant in a learning situation then they can be made use of quite successfully.

Unfortunately, a lot of design education depends on both modes operating at the same time. For example, learning how to perform a particular technique often overlaps with how that technique affects your design and thinking processes. In fashion design for example, the materiality of cognition and its relation to embodied skills can be so intertwined that it will be a challenge to do this at a distance. (I honestly have very little idea of what the boundaries of this might be – if anyone can help with this, please get in touch).

Some others may be more effectively separated. For example, basic sketching and representation can be demonstrated (even in a subject-specific way) and then applied to a design activity or project making direct use of the former in the latter. At later stages, how we sketch and why we do this becomes intertwined but very often the focus is more on the cognition and process than the actual motor skills of sketching.

Domain-specific skill development is beyond the scope of this guide, and if anyone has suggestions or ideas or resources that may be of interest to others then just get in touch (derek.jones@open.ac.uk).

3.4 Tuition

At the OU we have a very particular definition of tuition that comes from our practice and experience. Despite what you may think of the limits of distance education, our tuition model is driven by increasing connections, proximity, and presence. We divide students into tutor groups (of around 20 students) and it is at this sort of scale that most tuition opportunities take place.

Tuition is not teaching – it's not about any specific learning or teaching outcomes or delivering material. Instead it's an emergent activity that responds to what it is the student or student group needs to support their learning.

This is what can be facilitated so well in a **studio** setting.

Constructivist and Constructionist learning

Formally, most design tuition is principally constructionist (or constructivist) in nature. This basically means learning that it's opportunistic, localised, emergent, dependent on need and context, etc.: constructed by student and tutor.

Again, as designers we have an advantage here in that (in some ways) the entire design process is opportunistic and constructed. We set up the conditions under which activity may or may not take place depending on what we judge is needed at a point in the process.

At a distance, however, you need to plan and provide the opportunities for tuition to take place. There are many models for how to do this and it will depend on what you course needs. Hence, it's worth starting with what you do now and seeing what you currently rely that hasn't been replaced by other methods.

In other words: tuition opportunities are valuable at a distance. Treat them as the valuable commodity they are.

Tuition can take place both synchronously and asynchronously.

Synchronous is most likely what you will be used to and it can work very well if your students have good access. Internet busy times have changes slightly so think about when a good alternative time for holding a 1-many tutorial might be.

And having impromptu or responsive tuition opportunities can also help. For example, see the **[Recipe: Online Whiteboard Tutorial](#)** for an example of a quick, informal tuition setting. Even if you don't have these planned into your course, having this recipe ready to go as a backup is strongly recommended – regardless of what systems you use.

Asynchronously, don't underestimate the opportunities in spaces such as forums, VDSs, social media, and even email, to engage in a bit of tuition. For example, quick comments in a VDS can be effective, particularly of the type "Is it worth trying X, Y, X?" or posting examples and alternatives to student material.

But you need to induct students into this as a mode of tuition. At the OU we carry out this induction at the start of our courses, using introductory activities as a chance to initiate and

inculcate tuition practises right away. Our tutors use multiple modes of communication to work with students and, rather than content or teaching, they are looking for tuition and learning opportunities.

Once you get into the habit of this it does become habitual (you might even become an insufferable tutor, looking for any excuse to encourage just a bit more learning in students…)

So, take every opportunity you can. There is something to be learned in almost everything students do and often being a tutor is simply observing this learning. Sometimes it's even just being there to witness progress being made.

Student-Tutor relationships

The pastoral and interpersonal side of tuition is also important. The tutor-student relationship is central to another core design education theory – that of apprenticeship. Power relations in this dynamic can be problematic and many contemporary design teachers are aware of this, using their expertise to guide rather than dictate to students. Research shows that students tend to find this 'liminal servant' approach more effective and personable (Webster, 2004). And it works particularly well at a distance, where mediating your communication clearly and consistently is a necessity.

And, of course, there is the slightly trickier issue of simply being a likeable and nice person. Lamer (2009) identifies personability as a major factor in 'instructional immediacy' and relates this to student success at a distance. Students at the OU tend to report positive experiences of tutors at the same time as describing human qualities.

3.5 Studio

Studio is still central to many design education curricula (Cuff, 1992; Oxman, 1999; Crowther, 2013) and has been noted as one of the key aspects of traditional teaching that people are missing as a result of the pandemic. (Have a look at (Orr and Shreeve, 2018; Salama, 2017; Farïas and Wilkie, 2016) for a few recent works for explorations of this).

Studio is far more than a physical space and it is the non- (or meta-) physical aspects of it that are worth focusing on when designing online and distance learning: the cultural, professional, personal, social, affective, etc.

Contemporary research into VDS use strongly suggests that it is how these factors integrate and interact with the course design, infrastructure, atmosphere, etc. that make 'the studio' successful (Jones et al., 2020).

Many of these factors are elements and headings in this guide because it's assumed that, even if a VDS is not explicitly central to your design, the studio as a concept, and many of its properties, will still be relevant.

The Distance Design Education blog has a detailed post on **Virtual Design Studios** here.

You might also find it useful to look at the recipes: **Quick social studio** and **Co-designing with others during isolation**.

Studio culture and community

The one aspect of studio worth repeating and focusing on is the culture and community that can emerge in an online and distance studio. Research shows that this is a place where student and group progression can take place and be represented (made visible) (Jones et al., 2020), as follows:

- Early expression of individual preferences and activity
- Early social comparison
- Developing online presence: cognitive and social
- Early group identity and Community of Practice
- Early design presence

This then can lead to more advance development:

- Expression of **design personality** - GestalterpersonLichkeit (Lanig, 2019)
- Design presence and social comparison using designerly attributes (Lotz et al., 2018)
- Communities of Practice (Thomas et al., 2016; Kear, 2011)

Each of these can be seen as stages although very often there is more interaction between them.

3.6 Projects

Projects and project-based learning are yet another mode of learning central to design curricula, arguably a signature pedagogy in itself. Like studio, project based learning (formal name) is perhaps so ubiquitous that we don't even consider them as a learning form: we know what projects are, we get students to do them, and designers come out the end.

Without going into the general literature on this (which I admit to not knowing it nearly as well as I should!), the ways in which project based learning intersects with design is affected by our disciplines own knowledge and experience. As Sosa notes, this is an under-theorised area and one we tend not to explore formally (Sosa, 2020).

Sosa's paper focuses on the design brief, the core of design project based learning, and outlines 12 qualities of the design brief: essential and useful reading to help you think about your design briefs.

Go read Ricardo Sosa's paper **Qualities of Design Briefs for Studio Learning** (or on Research Gate or Academia.edu) and come back.

Sosa's project brief qualities are all still relevant in a distance and online setting. In fact, most require very little adjustment in your approach or to your projects (apart from the obvious, I hope?). However, taken together, they demonstrate the importance of student-centred learning to the project as a learning activity.

Hence, it is the contact, isolation and tuition that will make the difference. Flipping from teaching to learning is a necessary part of enabling this (see 0.1 Some key differences). But retaining the necessary contact points, check-ins or other tuition events is critical to ensure that students don't get lost or isolated

A final tip here is to repeat Phillips (2012) in Sosa – there really is no such thing as the perfect brief (that's arguably the whole point of design briefs as opposed to engineering specifications…). This is particularly true if you are trying a brief for the first time in an entirely new learning context and mode. So be open to adjustments in response to your students' needs and feedback, remembering that you're not necessarily seeing their reactions and responses as you would in a traditional setting.

3.7 Curriculum Patterns

Hopefully when you start to design some of your learning activities you'll start to see common patterns emerging. For example, you may start to get into the habit of including submission or feedback activity inside other activities to encourage engagement and work towards some assessment goal. This pattern in itself is an important learning design artefact.

For example, in our Stage 1 course at the OU we have a course pattern (4 large chunks of work; each of which is chunked into activities, reading, skills, and ending with a mini project. This project is assessed and the assessment itself is also a pattern whose structure is repeated each time. The repetition of these patterns help orient students and become familiar enough that students can see how the work they do develops as they progress in the course.

Alternatively, you can even start your course design using patterns if you're used to using learning patterns in a traditional course then you might find they fit well in an online and distance setting. For example, have a look at the **Blackboard Studio Model** which adapts a weekly studio pattern from a traditional art and design school to an online setting.

Working with patterns is usually the most efficient way to plan and design courses because it relies on you working with the right 'scale' of element – not too small; not too big. Judging this takes time and will depend on your subject area and own knowledge. But the truth is, it's not too much different to planning and design traditional courses.

4. The Outcome

All design courses have some outcome, usually partly formal and partly informal. These outcomes are one of the main drivers and motivations for taking the course. For some, it may be the formal qualification and recognition conferred. For others, it may mark a summary point at which they are able to demonstrate their capability.

Like so many other aspects of learning, making this work well is about giving these sorts of opportunities to students as much as anything else.

4.1 Assessment

Assessment, as you may suspect, is a significant driver for students (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013b). Regardless of your opinion of assessment, this means you can use it in your learning design to help orient students by using them as key goals and milestones in your course design.

The following points are some ideas and tips from our experience of design assessment at the OU, aimed particularly at students (and staff) new to distance education.

Expectations and purpose

The starting point, once again, is **making visible and explicit** what it is you are assessing, what your expectations are, and why you are doing this. If you have this already (and it's perfectly clear to students) then great.

Research shows time and again that clear, transparent and consistently applied criteria in assessment are needed to avoid feelings of unfairness. Vague objectives, uncertain assessment methods and differences in approach for different students should be avoided…

If not, this might be a good chance to review how it is you judge that engaging in your course has been successful. Maybe **time to reflect critically on this too**.

Mode

Like much of the rest of design education, we often assume that the way we assess is the only way to do it. The wall crit, end of year review, expert panel, have all become so habitual that it can be difficult to imagine other ways of assessing. At the very least, have a look at some other methods and modes: **Assessment alternatives at a time of university closures**

And it's worth keeping an eye on what others are doing. If nothing else, have a look at the recipe: **Making the design process visible**. This gives an example of how and what we assess at the OU, using concept mapping software to get students to represent their design process and then assessing the design process (not product). This works really well as summative and formative assessment as students develop their abilities.

If you are thinking about using traditional final reviews or crits, then have a look at these posts by Jolanda and Jo:

> **Recipe: Online final design reviews**
> **Recipe: The live online desk crit**

Assess early and regularly

Like any other learning activity, your students need to learn how to do it. Students learn how to do exams in secondary education and many universities tend to use these too to save time. But

it's likely that your assessment will take a very different form and you need to communicate this very clearly indeed to students.

Think about assessing very early in your course to:

- Communicate assessment expectations by demonstration and practice (usually a good idea to make this formative only…)
- Demonstrate how your assessment and feedback works to help them and align with their motivations.
- Support your most vulnerable students. Research shows clear links between early failure and a disproportionate impact on confidence in future learning (Lizzio and Wilson, 2013b).

So, get in early and this will allow you to provide support to those who particularly need it. A good tip to achieve this is to use an 'early win' assessment that boosts confidence in using the systems and working with your / course expectations. This can be both formative and summative, but the focus is on getting students used to a way of working and habit that will support them later in your course.

Of course, getting the balance between an 'easy win' without making it feel trivial is the trick. One way to think about this is to make use of your subject as the hook and assess the **process** students go through – in other words, refocus from what is produced to what is done to achieve that output. This works really well if you approach it as a collective practice: one of exploring and assessing what the student cohort of designers do, rather than only focusing on what they produce.

Avoid large, single-point, high stakes assessments

At the OU we tend to have multiple assessment points and try to avoid very large high-risk assessment (e.g. a large project that's weighted to a large majority of the course outcome, assessed at a single point). At a distance you may have far fewer checks and indicators of student progress, hence what a student finally submits may vary considerably from what you think they've been working on.

This problem can be lessened by having regular studio or tuition contact points (as you would in a traditional setting) and is a more likely model for later stage students. But another approach is to design your assessment to incorporate such contact points throughout.

This also depends very much on students' stage of learning. Until students gain confidence in online learning and assessment it's worth starting with smaller, lower stakes assessment. At later stages students' experience of assessment could be taken into account and you may even consider co-designing or negotiating assessments with students.

Process and quality

Hopefully, you already have assessment policies and procedures in place and (ideally) these will have been updated and adapted to take account of current contexts. How flexible your

institution is and/or how it supports student assessment taking into account their context(s) will affect how they relate to their study (Alarcon and Edwards, 2013; Edwards and Minton, 2009).

Making the assessment processes very clear to students is more than simply dumping lots of information on them. Being both efficient and effective in your communication matters because students are very likely to be stressed, confused or upset when they need to make use of them. Contextualising procedures and policies for your subject area can help here and even a standard FAQ for your subject area can be useful at these key stages.

4.2 Feedback

Feedback is critical in design generally as a grounded and applied subject. Unlike theoretical subjects, there are rarely any explicitly 'correct' results. All responses to design projects or activities are contingent on their construction in context(s), including the designer or design student themselves.

This was recognised by Schön in his idea of a student as a 'system of feedback' (Ramage, 2017), where the feedback is reflective (either 'in' practice or 'on' that practice itself) (Schön, 1987). The first form of reflection should be encouraged in students through other activities and elements in your course (**1.2 Personal development: Reflection**). The second form, reflection on practice, usually has to be made visible by the student in some way to allow it to take place, particularly if it is to be discussed or assessed with someone else.

Purpose and visibility

In a traditional setting feedback is often carried out through discussion, desk crits, studio practice, reviews etc. It can also be done through the use of design journals, sketchbooks, diaries, etc. to encourage reflective practice in student. Both modes can be used to assess student reflection, albeit the latter provides perhaps a more explicit opportunity to do this. Both highlight the importance of externalising and making feedback visible in any design education setting.

Both modes can also be directly applied to a distance setting with the latter the more tangible outcome. Like so many other elements in this guide, it is the 'making visible' that can be the challenge. Students can find reflection difficult to engage with and having to do this in an alien way (such as posting online or stopping a design process in order to write down thoughts) can add to this difficulty.

But one thing that can significantly support and improve this is the quality of feedback you give to students based on this reflection. If students learn to see the value of reflection as part of a feedback loop that improves their work, it starts to become a valuable and even habitual activity. From the OU experience this is the best way to 'teach' the value of reflection and feedback: to demonstrate its value as an intrinsic part of the design process by getting students to experience that value for themselves.

As students progress, this feedback hopefully starts to become reflective dialogue between student and tutor, where both are asking questions of the work in order to make it better.

To get to this stage, you need very high quality feedback.

Do good feedback, not bad. Good. Not Bad

Providing good feedback takes time and this is often an unresolved issue in education. You may have 20 pieces of student feedback to produce but students only see 1 that one matters significantly to them.

Good feedback clearly articulates the state of an assessed piece of work/learning to the student with a view to making a difference to how a student tackles future pieces of work. Short, confirmatory feedback may have its place in quick checkpoints but, for formative learning to take place, more than "This was good" is required. The complete feedback loop, after Sadler's (Sadler, 1989) version of Ramaprasad's (Ramaprasad, 1983) classic definition is to provide feedback in order to communicate:

- What you expected
- What the student did
- How these things were different
- Why that matters and what the effects were
- What they should not do next time
- What they can do more of next time

When written out like this it may seem longer and more detailed than it actually needs to be. Not all work will require explicit statements on these elements of feedback: feedback must be student-centred and different students respond to different elements of feedback.

The standard of the work, too, will dictate which part(s) of this feedback you focus on for particular students: an early stage student may need more work on what was expected (e.g. induction to assessment), whereas an advanced student may require feedback on what to do next time (e.g. developing expertise).

For example:

- This was a well-balanced composition that made it easy to see, read and understand your proposal. This was what was required for this particular brief. More of this in future work! To make this even better (and if you had time) I'd look at the fine detail on the bespoke font heading – tweaking this to make it perfect would be my next move.

Or

- The composition felt imbalanced, meaning I wasn't sure where to start looking (the elements competed for my attention). Have a look at COURSE-ELEMENT and EXAMPLES for some ideas on how to achieve this. Next time, try sketching multiple ideas for outline compositions and get some feedback on these as part of your process.

At a distance, getting good at providing clear, effective and efficient feedback is critical and it can be used as a principle in multiple settings, not just assessment feedback. Even a comment

on a piece of work in a forum or VDS can incorporate some version of the above loop in order to give students some means of improving their work.

Tone and character

Finally, your tone of feedback is important for the hopefully obvious reason that you will not be there when the feedback is interpreted – misunderstanding is incredibly easy to find online (see **Misunderstanding is common**). This means that the way in which you phrase feedback matters far more than if you were only speaking it. Sometimes you may even end up with a lot of text in order to explain something in a way that (you hope) will be best understood by a particular student.

This can make feedback a time consuming and difficult process. These challenges are one reason why we trialled the use of audio feedback in our design modules. This allows the affective content to be communicated as well as the learning content and student feedback shows that it is perceived as more personal and personable, reducing distance and increasing presence (Jones and Hilton, In Press). Have a look at the **Recipe: Connecting using Audio Feedback** (coming soo…) for more on how we do this.

4.3 Portfolio, PDP, Shows and publics

Closure

The end of a course can be as important a transition as induction for students in any educational setting. Imagine how much more difficult that is without any physical or final event to mark this passage. In distance education a known issue is that the end of courses can very often simply trail away: the student submits their work and then waits for weeks to hear about a result, for all the same reasons that have been outlined repeatedly above.

So, having some way to mark this, just as you would in a traditional setting, is worth thinking about. Many institutions have already made use of virtual and online degree shows and public presentations to achieve this and it's worth having a look at these (a recent example is the **Glasgow School of Art Showcase 2020**).

As noted in Personal development, there may also be semi-public and public online services that are core to your subject area (e.g. professional portfolio services in specific domains; online libraries and repositories; shared public spaces for clusters; etc.).

These subject-specific outputs are beyond the scope of this general guide and staying connected with colleagues in your subject area is useful here. We will add examples of these to the **Distance Design Education Resources page** as they become available.

1.5 Quality and feedback

It might seem like a long way away but, at some point, you will need to evaluate your course and reflect on it and feedback. In fact, a good idea is to design such feedback (and even iteration) into your course from the start. This can be as informal as regular touchpoints as part of your other learning activities or more formally at certain key stages.

Very often, being open with your students about your course being new or adapted can be instructional in itself. At the OU, for example, we often tell students we are trying new software, and actively encourage them to treat this as part of their design education, by giving feedback, user testing, suggesting modifications, etc. And, just as in any other design process, how you react and respond to criticism can make a difference to your relationship with students (just as it might with clients!).

Formally, we also engage in end of course feedback using standard questionnaires, giving us comparative data over periods of time. If you've used standard feedback questionnaires in your existing courses, you may still have questions that can be usefully used in your new context. Comparison may be difficult in terms of analytical rigour, but your qualified interpretation of these data still has value.

There are also some very common particularities in student feedback at a distance, and especially online, that can skew results without suitable interpretation. Many of these are around 'magnifying' effects, but that's another guide – let's do the teaching of the course first!

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