

Course Designer: Course Structure



Course Structure

This section of the Course Designer addresses the functionality of course design or re-design.

A well designed course structure will communicate itself clearly to stakeholders, including potential students, registry, validating committees, and the wider academic community. This section includes activities relating to four methods of describing structure: course diagram, course description, student journey, and teaching and learning patterns.

Designing a course (unit) diagram

Creating a course diagram is one part of a basic course outline, and will be determined by mandatory components or constraints at school, college or institutional level, e.g. the requirement to create units of a particular credit size, or to include cross-programme units that are undertaken by all students at certain levels. At UAL, University and College level credit frameworks will detail these requirements.

Drawing a diagram can assist in decision-making on how to design syllabus content. Deciding how to sequence, balance or adjust options is made simpler when represented in visual form. For instance, to balance short and wide or long and thin units; to progress from small to large units; or adjust proportions of a course spent on theory, technical, work-based or studio time.

Organising content

Some common methods of organising or sequencing content across units are as follows:¹

- **Logical** – identifying an inherent logic within the subject matter or discipline, e.g. simple to complex; iterative; foundational to advanced; synthesis. Certain themes, skills or topics are logically primary, others secondary
- **Thematic** – prioritizing particular key concepts, qualities or tasks in some way, e.g. historically, geographically, or stylistically
- **Project-led or problem-solving** – designing sets of activities that are used as a vehicle for content learning, often real-world, event-led or professionally framed
- **Psychological** - addressing student development through structured experiences that are competency-based, or focus on student performance (behaviour)

Course description

A course description is often linked to a programme specification database (such as AKARI at UAL) and, along with the course description, this forms a contract with a prospective student of the teaching they will receive. The course description will be a narrative articulation of the course values and vision, course aims and outcomes, and general approach to teaching and learning.

Principles for creating a basic course description:

- **Clarity** - use accessible and non-specialist language where possible. Provide a summary of course values and vision
- **Quality** - do look at other course descriptions (at UAL, on AKARI) to maintain coherence within the wider university portfolio
- **Content** - agree and describe the guaranteed offer in terms of content, processes and outcomes. Any distinctive features can also be included

The student journey

Recent innovative approaches to course design use the student journey to emphasise student experience and a process model of curriculum design.² This approach meets the requirements of different individuals and a broad spectrum of student identities. We can either speak to alumni and document their journey, or imagine a fictional student's progress through the course, as suggested in the activities section.

Distributing teaching and learning types across the course structure

Teaching and learning can be elaborated from basic types such as Practice, Production, Collaboration, Discussion, Investigation and Acquisition³ and tailored to each course context. However, we need to consider what benefits each type offers students, and what each method achieves in terms of the effectiveness and rationale of the course. Table 1 (back page) links such types with theory. The rationale for designing any one teaching and learning method into any one level or stage of the course, and how they are combined, should be to provide maximum benefits to students.



“Art and design pedagogy is obscure, ambiguous and sticky... Clarity and opacity therefore co-exist in the curriculum.”⁴

One of the key contributions of art and design pedagogy is the complexity and divergence of creative outputs that it encourages. This is world-making. Alignment with the world⁵ can involve taking a position on ‘the kind of society we want’ with students enabled to ‘construct their own learning.’⁶

Activities

Course diagram and description

Draw a diagram of the sequence of units that complete the course. Devise your basic course description.

These two elements together will complete a public facing course structure, one that focusses specially on sequencing of content and key information. Unique distinctive features of courses at UAL are written in validation and/or reapproval documents. Together these define the course culture and identity.

Student journey

Using a storyboard or timeline describe either:

- an actual student journey through the course, or
- predict an imaginary student journey for a particular ‘fictional profile’ of a type of student

Words and/or pictures can map student journeys through the course to see what this reveals about the course structure. For instance, there may be aspects of progression that are difficult, or certain options that need to be provided at certain points in the course that this student would benefit from.

Teaching and learning types

Draw or illustrate the varieties of teaching and learning types or activities used throughout the course on tracing paper. Overlay these onto the course diagram to show the variety of planned teaching and learning activities and any options that need to be provided to vary the standard offer of methods.

Now discuss what teaching and learning strategies are most required or beneficial at key stages of the course structure e.g. the outset of the course in Level 4, at the start of level 5 and end of level 6. Are any types of teaching and learning overused and any under used? How do the strategies change to best support, develop and extend positive student experience and facilitate positive student journeys?

Inclusive curriculum design will provide a varied offer of teaching and learning types and give students a choice, or options, especially at important stages of the course structure e.g. where some cohorts may need in-depth independent study time, others might benefit from 1:1 tutorials, or peer work.

The same course content can often be accessed, or delivered, in numerous ways.



Table 1: Translating teaching and learning types into student benefits for effective course structure

Example teaching and learning types	Example benefits for effective design ⁷
Face-to-face tutor-student interaction (e.g. discussion or collaboration or acquisition)	Encourages student-teacher contact Clarifies relevance and meaning of content and tasks Sets clear high expectations
Digital/online (tutor-student, peer or individual or social interactions)	Offers student choice in content and process Fosters active learning
Groupwork	Develops collaborative learning
Independent study esp. with student defined and constructed tasks (e.g. Practice or investigation or acquisition)	Encourages student responsibility
Project and extended research	Embraces student diversity Promotes critical thinking
Workshop, technical or skills-based development	Enables well-structured knowledge Provides prompt and instructive feedback

References:

Full references can be found in the Course Designer Introduction and Resources List.

- (1) This list is derived from an overview of the sequencing literature. O'Neill et al (2014 pp. 268-280); O'Neill (2015 p.52); Toohey, S. (1999 pp.48-68). Note, these can overlap or change at different stages and levels of the course.
- (2) Young and Perović (2018) used student journeys in a storyboard approach for the Area Blended Connected Learning Design (ABC LD) workshop.
- (3) Laurillard argued for exchanging patterns across digital platforms and defined acquisition, inquiry, discussion, practice, collaboration as key patterns (2012).
- (4) Orr and Shreeve (2018, p147).
- (5) Also known as alignment with the world: 'To teach in varied communities [...] the engaged voice must never be fixed and absolute but always changing, always evolving in dialogue with a world beyond itself' hooks, b. (1994 p.11) This is also called 'alignment outside the classroom' in Watermeyer, R. (2011).
- (6) Kandico and Blackmore (2012) Biggs (2003) respectively.
- (7) Criteria for effective course design collated from Biggs (2003), Ramsden (2003), Chickering and Gamson (1987) and Garrison and Anderson (2003) in Table 2.1 Warren, D. 'Course and Learning Design and Evaluation' (2016 p.17).



UAL Course Designer credits

Course Designer is a set of materials produced by the Teaching, Learning and Employability Exchange to support staff in designing arts curricula in Higher Education.

It is intended to complement course validation and/or reapproval and will be useful to course leaders and teams who want to devise or revise their courses to ensure they are coherent.

The resource consists of:

- Introduction and Resources List
- Course Vision and Values
- Defining Course Aims
- Crafting Learning Outcomes
- Designing Inclusive Assessment
- **Course Structure**



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