

Updating Learning Programmes I: 10 First Principles

This is the first in a series of articles aimed at organisations and educational institutions who wish to overhaul existing learning programmes.

10 First Principles

According to Paul Ramsden, “all aspects of teaching in higher education should be driven by the changes in understanding we want to see occur in our students” (Learning to Teach in Higher Education, 1992: 130). The same is true for organisational learning — even moreso, as the goal is concentrated on quite specific outcomes.

With any anticipated major change to a programme of study, it is imperative to go back to first principles and re-examine the purpose for the programme, the learning aims and objectives, tacit assumptions about learning embedded in the programme, and the assessment practice resulting from these. We must make sure that these are still valid and worthy of driving the outcomes of the programmes.

Honest answers to the following questions should guide programme change:

1. Why should learners learn this subject?

What will it do for them personally and professionally? What will it do for the organisation? Are we being altruistic, or selfish, or balanced? Is this a box-ticking exercise to satisfy some management imperative further up the chain? Is this a historic or traditional holdover (“we’ve always done this”)? Or is there a real value? How does this subject overlap with other subjects?

2. Who are we targeting for this programme?

Are we serving this group with what we offer them? Have we matched the right subject to the right people? Have we articulated our ideal learner? If so, are we reaching them? If we haven’t set an ideal, who do we think we’re teaching? What do we know about our real learners?

3. For what specific aims and objectives do we ask learners to strive?

Have we set out specific aims and objectives? If so, are these reasonable, valuable and consistent with the purpose? Are these clearly articulated to the learners? How do we measure whether these objectives are valid and whether they’ve been met? Assessment, pass rates, learner evaluation, all three? (More on assessment in a later article.)

4. What prior knowledge do we ask learners to have when they begin the programme?

Have we pitched the programme right? Do we know what learners should already know? Is this realistic? Do we know what they really do know? What do we do if they’re missing prior knowledge? What do we do if they know more than we expected? How do we make the learning worthwhile for everyone on the programme?

5. What content will provide the basis for learning?

How is the learning content chosen? How is it prepared for the methods of delivery and engagement we want to use? Who is responsible for this and how well-prepared are they to follow through?

6. What methods and tools will we ask learners to use to engage with

the content?

Have we done some research and considered a range of options made possible by interactive media? Or are we in default position only offering the two traditional transmission methods: reading and lecturing? Have we deliberately matched the delivery and engagement methods to the types and subjects of learning? Do learners have sufficient knowledge, access and instruction to use these effectively? Do we have sufficient knowledge and experience to guide them?

7. What theories and models of teaching and learning undergird the design of the programme?

Are we basing our choices and decisions on specific educational theories and models? Are they appropriate? Do we have the knowledge and experience to put them into practice effectively? Are we flexible enough to modify our ideas if things don't go as planned without creating a disaster?

8. What is the best way to support learners in reaching these aims and objectives?

What kind of expertise and support are we employing in our programme: demonstrators, lecturers, teachers, tutors, facilitators, mentors, coaches, peers, administrators? How will they interact with the learners? (How) will the learners interact with each other? What kinds of support will be available, from whom, what methods and how often? Are all support staff and experts experienced with the methods they need to use to perform their roles?

9. Do we have sufficient resources?

Are our plans and ideas realistic? Have we asked for assistance from any available Learning Support staff? Can we get grants, awards, external funding or budget enhancements to support our monetary needs? Do we have the manpower to enact the changes and to facilitate the new version of the programme? Can we re-deploy and re-train people from other areas? Is this sustainable? Have we explored low-cost and time-efficient alternatives?

10. Do all stakeholders have buy-in?

Has everyone with a stake in the success of the programme been consulted or informed (as appropriate) about the planned changes to the programme? Is there support and goodwill from all quarters? Does anyone critical need special attention to bring them round or allay their fears?



These are 10 daunting but crucial first principles that need to be reviewed and addressed before any major change is initiated to an existing learning programme — please help by visiting my blog (<http://www.architela.com/blog/>) and offering more from your own vantage point.

In the next article, I'll tackle some of the common assumptions that form obstacles to initiating change.