

Appendix 2:

Building your own platform

Where to start?

A good approach is to take a leaf out of the books on Instructional Systems Design (ISD). Most ISD models have five core phases: analysis, design, development, implementation and evaluation. This was originally a linear process arriving at a finished product. Nowadays, once the initial analysis has been completed, it is more common to proceed in iterative loops. This involves the design and development of a prototype which is then implemented and trialled. The results of this evaluation are fed back into the next loop of design, development, implementation and evaluation. Three loops are often enough to arrive at a finished product, in this case your platform, that meets the needs established in the analysis stage.

Analyse

The key phase of the entire project is the initial analysis. This should be as detailed as possible for two main reasons. First of all, to be clear about why you need a platform. This is first and foremost to support your Blended Learning (BL) courses. Are you already running BL courses or are you waiting for the platform before you start? Either way, you must ask the people responsible for designing those courses what they need now and what they think they might also need in future. In fact, the design of the platform and the BL courses should run in parallel. The importance of this stage of the analysis is that it allows you to confirm that there really are no pre-existing platform solutions that fit your needs; that building your own platform is the only option open to you.

The BL course designers are only one part of your audience. The second part of your analysis should be to talk to everybody else who will use the platform. This includes teachers, students, administrative staff, business and pedagogical management, and sales and marketing people. Each group will have different needs so tailor your questions to help you understand those needs. Here are some questions you can ask:

- What content should the platform have?
- What functional features should the platform have? For example, discussion forums, course calendars, tracking tools and so on. Categorise these as: must have, nice to have, not necessary.
- As a student/teacher/manager etc., what benefits do you think a platform will have for you?
- What previous experience do you have of using platforms? Was it positive or negative?
- What experience do you have of using ICT tools for learning? What training do you think you will need?
- How would you like to be able to access the platform: using a computer, smartphone, or tablet?
- What concerns do you have? For example, security of personal information, the platform displacing teachers and so on.

The team

Once you have collected and correlated the information from your needs analysis and target population analysis, you then need to make decisions about who is going to build the platform. At a minimum, you require people to create the content, build the website and trial it with teachers and students. This means materials writers, people who can create audio and video, designers, website builders with varying levels of skill depending on the functionality you have deemed necessary, and the cooperation of teachers and pedagogical managers who are prepared to find the time to help with the trials. You will need to talk to all these people whether they are part of your organisation or outside suppliers. Explain your plans and ask them to estimate the time required and cost of achieving those plans. Now you are ready to present your plan to management.

Design and develop

Once you have the green light, you can start designing your platform. The main reason that organisations opt for purpose-built platforms is that they want to be able to organise content in a particular way and provide functionality that meets the specific needs of courses they provide. The first stage of the design should be the highest level of organisation, how is the content going to be divided up? Figure 2 shows some examples, although most purpose-built platforms usually have a combination of several of these.

By language skill	By language area
Speaking Listening Reading Writing	Grammar Vocabulary Pronunciation
By function (this example is from a business English platform)	By level
Presentations Telephoning Meetings Writing emails	Beginner Intermediate Advanced
By course	By topic
General English Business English English for Academic purposes Exams	Travel Home Family Food and drink

Figure 2: Ways of organising content

Once you have decided on your top-level organisation you can move on to how to sub-divide those sections. Other things to think about are:

- How will the platform be navigated? I.e. what menus will be displayed?
- Will there be fixed routes through the content or will students be able to browse as they wish?
- Will the platform be searchable? If you opt for this, you need to think about how to tag content.
- This level of planning can take time but it is worth it in the long run. Making the right decisions at this early stage means you avoid major changes later which could delay or completely derail the project.

Implement and evaluate

When you start developing content and building the platform, it is a good idea to begin with a single, representative section which can be trialled with selected users. It is not necessary for this prototype of your platform to be a finished product, just make sure the people participating in the trial know that it is only a test version. You are mainly interested in the overall look and usability of the platform, for example, how easy is it to navigate, does the basic functionality work the way you envisioned? At this stage use quickly-produced images and audio as placeholders rather than commissioning professionally produced assets that may not find their way to the final version.

Tell the people participating in the trial exactly what you need to know. Provide them with questionnaires, guides, and example activities which can be blended with existing courses. After you have collected this information, return to the prototype and make any major changes then conduct another trial. During this stage you can also develop further sections of the platform. Two trials may be enough or you may decide to conduct a third. Once you are confident that the platform and its content and functionality meets the needs of the users, you can roll out whatever parts are complete and ready for use while development continues on the remaining sections.

After the roll-out

The roll-out of the completed platform is not the end of the job. Users, especially teachers, need training on how to use the platform. They, themselves, will have to train their students how to use it. You can support this with downloadable guides and how-to videos on the platform. In the early days, users will discover lots of typos and malfunctioning activities that slipped through the net during development. Somebody needs to be responsible for acknowledging and dealing with these. In the long-run, you should have a plan for keeping the platform up to date. This may just involve periodically checking that links to outside resources still work or are replaced, or updating features like 'word of the day' or weekly newsletters.