

Towards excellent user support

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BACKGROUND

If you attended university, you will remember that nobody really cared that much about whether you passed, failed, or simply dropped out. Unlike school, nobody asked you where you were yesterday. It was something of an awakening. You could learn from it, or you could make some expensive mistakes. Whether you passed or failed you would still have a student loan that looked like a telephone number!

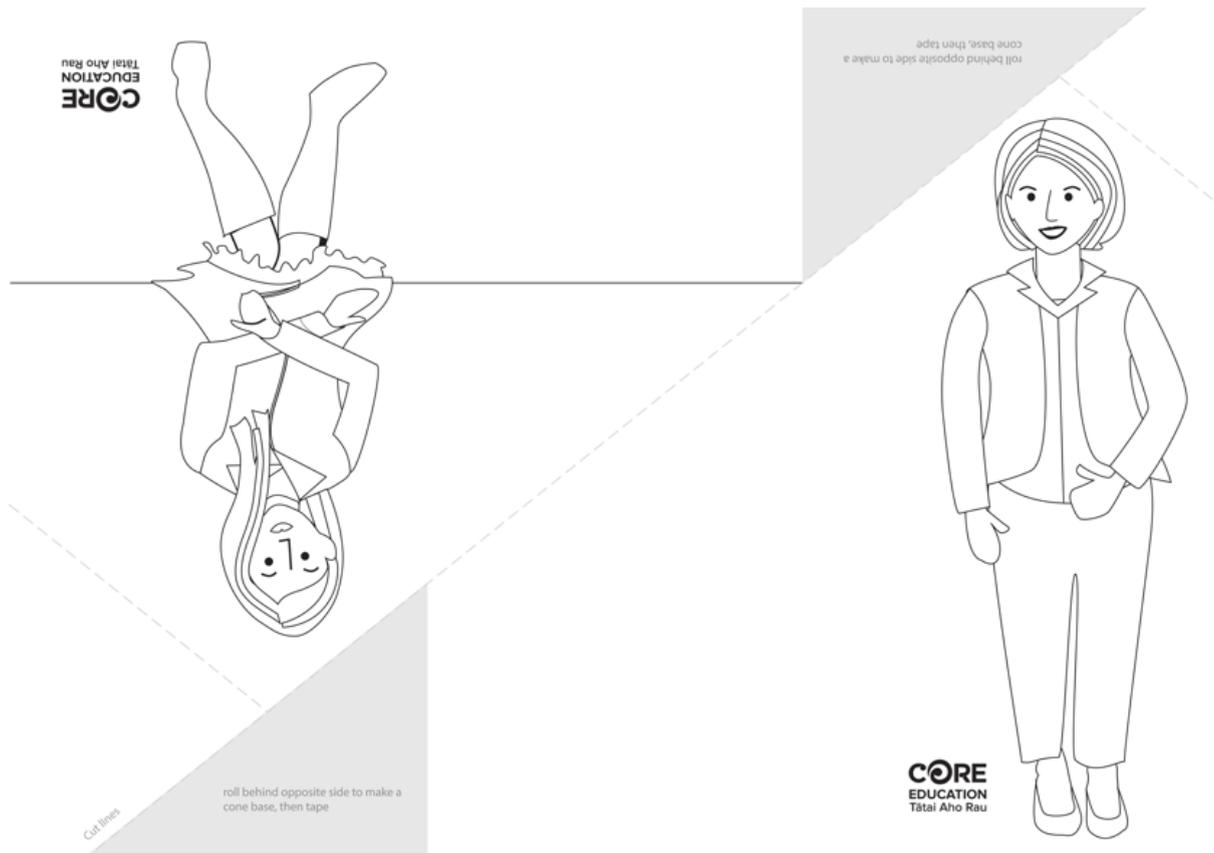
There is a real danger that online learning can become a system of empty corridors and empty rooms. Opening a door, you may find a person in there silently reading a book, determined to complete some module. If there was a window, we'd see that it's dark outside. That's because, for many young professionals, the night is the only time they can find for their studies.



TAKING A DESIGN APPROACH

I'm starting with this dystopian view of online professional development on purpose to make a point. Excellent user support begins with empathy. I'm proposing that we start our journey towards excellent user support by picking a process. One such process that has emerged as a universal tool is Design Thinking. The flavour we use is the one taught at Stanford's [d.school](#) under [Professor Leticia Britos Cavagnaro](#). We empathise, define, ideate, prototype, and test — and we do it in a series of fast iterations.

We can't go one step further without considering the morality of A/B testing. Josh Constine covers it off pretty well in a blog post he titles, [The Morality of A/B Testing](#). If you want the skinny on it, it's this: If you try out new ideas on Group A and they prove to be of great benefit, Group B have been disadvantaged. Conversely, if the new ideas prove to be a disaster, then Group A have been disadvantaged. So, what I am proposing are not experiments on real learner groups, but some thought experiments. Create five personas — archetypes of your learner base. Multiply them by two. Call them Group A and Group B. Use them how you want. Don't worry, they're only cardboard.



Let's get empathising

These people who are our participants, it doesn't really matter who they are, most have a number of things in common. Into their bucket they have to place some big rocks, then they'll fit in some pebbles around those, as best they can. Then they'll pour in the sand.

Let's take Toni as an example. One of Toni's big rocks is to take part in a marathon, for which she must get fit. This is not something she just wants to do, it is something she is absolutely committed to doing. Her next big rock is to get out of a shared flat and into a house of her own; she feels it as a pressing need and it can't come soon enough. That makes keeping her job another big rock, because she needs the money. That's three big rocks she has in her bucket already. She enjoys her job as a teacher. Being the best teacher she can for her class, she is always looking for new and better ways to facilitate their learning.

Time to start defining

0600 Alarm clock

0630 – 0700 Run

0730 – 0800 Prepare for some class

0800 – 0830 Eat breakfast on the train

0900...

OK, I won't go on. You get the idea. If you're reading this blog you may even be a school teacher, so you know what it's like.

Ready to ideate

The seasoned design thinker will never shortchange the first two steps of the process. Peeps who haven't yet learned to do Design Thinking tend to jump straight to ideating, based on a whole mass of assumptions. Those first two steps of Empathising and Defining will have uncovered some truths. One of these might be that professional development is not one of Toni's big rocks. Even if it is, her bucket is already full of big rocks. I have an idea! Yes, what? Let's make her online professional development pebble-sized. Cool idea, let's try it!

Get cardboard and glue, prototype!

Wow! This is an amazing process... are we prototyping already? Yes, we are. But, before we can hope to have a workable solution we can expect to go through these steps a thousand times. It is said, if you really want to Samba you have to be prepared to dance.

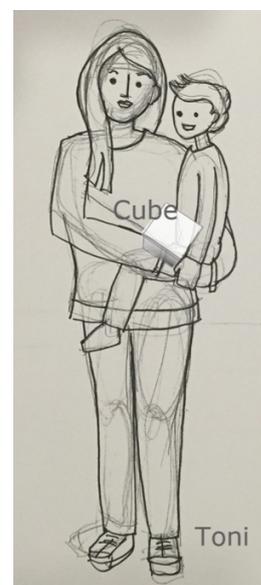
So, one idea we are going to prototype and test is to make her online professional development pebble-sized. Make it so she can fit it in around her big rocks.

Now, we're cutting out and gluing up a cube. A cube has five (just kidding) six faces. From the Empathising we did, we look for a problem Toni might have, and we write that on one face. Let's say it's Anzac Day (easy one for an example). Much of the school day will be taken up with Anzac Day type activities. So, Toni wants to get some mileage out of this and tie it to the curriculum. Write that on another face. But she also wants to peg it on a recognised learning strategy. Write some links on another face. Enough... you can work out the rest.

Let's try it out on Toni

We don't have a real Toni. But we've got this cardboard one. Let's pretend she's real and ask her what it will be like for her to use our cube. It's portable, so she can do it on the train with one hand while she holds her croissant in the other (she can hold her coffee with her knees). It's stateful, so, when she has to put it in her bag to get off the train, it remembers where she's up to. When she gets to school, she can put it on the desk in front of her. It's light and tough and wipe-clean so she can pass it around the room. We think we could be onto something.

It's time to take stock of where we are in this piece about our journey towards excellent user support. Up until now it doesn't seem to be about user support. But that is the point I'm making. User support begins with learning experience design. If the online professional development doesn't meet the user's needs, there will be no user to support. The better the learning experience design, the less need there will be for support. Design out every wrinkle that you can, and document what you can't. A course that needs lots of meta-instruction and scaffolding is a poorly designed course that nobody wants. Our



moon-shot is online professional development that you can pick up and run with without one word of explanation. Something that is truly fit for purpose.

WHAT DOES EXCELLENT USER SUPPORT LOOK LIKE?

By following the process outlined and illustrated above, we came up with a definition of excellent user support. Now we have a manifesto to ideate around, prototype, and test.

The Learning Experience team at CORE think it looks like this:

- Baked into the course design
- Proactive and unobtrusive
- Caring and supportive
- Non-judgemental
- Multi-modal.

Let's unpack that now. At CORE, we currently work on three platforms:

- iQualify
- Matrix
- Moodle.

I'm going to use Moodle for my examples, but I'm sure the concepts apply equally to any mainstream Learning Management System.

Baked into the course design

It's really easy to build activities into a course that will tell you who is engaging and who needs some support wrapped around them. A synchronous session like a webinar requires that everybody rocks up at a pre-ordained time. It is usual to record the session for those who genuinely cannot attend due to other commitments. If a participant fails to show at the webinar and fails to access the recording, that's a big white truce flag being waved by somebody who is losing the battle. You can switch on your protocols for an intervention. Forums are not so much of a barometer because some participants just hate forums, but they may still be accessing all the other resources and activities. Extrinsic motivators such as points, leaderboards, and badges may give an indication, but, be aware that some people will game the system. Let's come back to that one another day.

Proactive and unobtrusive

A design flaw in early e-learning was the omnipresence of the course owner. Talking-head videos, overlay video lectures in unconvincing virtual environments, and responses to every post in the forums became seriously irksome for participants who felt they had no escape from their over-enthusiastic teacher. In my opinion, the online space belongs to the student,

and the teacher is an observer who should only interject when necessary. Scaffolding, if it is required, should be baked into the course.

Platform support is similar. Tech support should be like the genie in Aladdin's lamp. When you need them, they magically appear; when you don't need them, they're totally invisible. That doesn't mean they can't be watching. I dream of an online programme that has a Houston-like control room at its back. The learning designers go about their regular work on their next project, but in the room are large monitors displaying the live logs. When they see three failed login attempts they pop up a dialogue: "We see you're having trouble logging in. How may we help you?" Help is not a dumb chatbot but a direct line to a human who knows their stuff. In this room, a morning stand-up meeting shares information about participants the system has advised are 'at risk'. Interventions are planned. No-one is abandoned. No-one falls through the cracks.

Caring and supportive

Most learners are fragile. As I explored earlier in this piece through the personas, online professional development has to find its place in an already full bucket. When an intervention solicits an email response from a participant who says her computer crashed and she lost her assignment, we don't go, "Oh, yeah! Heard that one before haha!" Instead, we put together an extension plan or offer her the option of dropping out of this delivery and joining the next one without incurring any extra charges. We do what we can, and our tone reflects the genuine concern we feel for her circumstances. Hopefully, we're all human.

Non-judgemental

It is extremely interesting to me that when online learning designers sign up for MOOCs, they invariably fall behind and trot out all the usual excuses for failing to keep up! It is not our business to judge others. Our job is to reach out an arm to people drowning in the busyness of their own lives or facing their inability to assimilate and retain new information. A holistic approach, seeing online professional development in the bigger picture of their work-life balance, and their general well-being pays the greatest dividends in the long haul.

Multi-modal

Many communications channels are available to us now. That the IT department of a large organisation offers help only through the one channel of a ticket system makes good sense. But the learning experience team can probably afford to be more generous and offer support through email, instant messaging, and mobile phone. The main thing is to know who on the team has picked up a support call, so we don't fall over each other in the rush to help. Our method is a Gmail group, and we have one for each of our main platforms, Moodle, and Matrix. Any support call becomes somebody's top priority until the issue is resolved.

CONCLUSION

I like to understand things by extrapolating to the ludicrous. Let me do that now. If we could design online learning that had zero defects and a perfect user interface, then the need for user support would vanish. But, in this imaginary future, we also have a home-help robot that spends the day playing Canasta with granny. It cleans the house and starts cooking tea

ready for when we get home. If anything goes wrong with the robot, I think I'd want to be able to call a helpline and talk to an empathic human agent.

If your users are having anything other than an excellent learning experience, you might want to engage CORE's LX team in a conversation. Previously, we have worked in the primary, secondary, tertiary, and public sectors. Our experience in the private sector is somewhat limited, but all the same principles apply. We can create an action plan for you to take forward, or we can stay on and work with you to implement it. Contact us.

RESOURCES

[CORE LX](#) can supply you with some cardboard cut-out personas, we'll be interested to hear what you're doing. Send email to Stephen Lowe.

A website that offers free patterns for prototyping/teaching materials is <http://atozteacherstuff.com/>

Anyone can do a [Virtual Crash Course in Design Thinking](#) on the d.school website.

SEE OTHER POSTS IN THIS SERIES

Stephen is writing a series of posts on online learning design. Here are the first two in the series

- [LMS or LRS – It takes two to tango](#)
- [Making a start with student data analysis](#)

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Graphics by CORE



Stephen Lowe

[Stephen Lowe](#) has an MSc in Computer Science from University of Liverpool in the UK. He developed and taught a 3-year multimedia course at Aoraki Polytechnic before coming to CORE Education seven years ago as a Learning Designer.