

Erasmus+ project
ABC to VLE: Beyond Curriculum Design



ABC LD Toolkit 2020

Part 5.

Does ABC LD work?

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Resources available from <http://abc-ld.org>

PART 5 DOES ABC WORK?

5.1 EVALUATING ABC – INITIAL FEEDBACK

At first, ABC can seem a challenging and even risky methodology. The dynamic, group based, rapid development format may feel quite different to existing methods of curriculum design, and even ‘normal’ academic development events. The questions from people unfamiliar with the method are obvious. How will our academic colleagues react? Can such an apparently simple method achieve any useful results? Does it work for all disciplines? Won’t skeptical and resistant colleagues disrupt the workshop? What if I can’t answer the questions that come up? These, and others, are all perfectly valid concerns, and not easy to answer without experiencing the workshop directly. Since launching ABC in 2015, the UCL team have therefore made a considerable effort to run ABC workshops in many different institutions, and indeed that was a central component of the Erasmus+ project. The belief was that by seeing how the format works by actually doing it, participants could judge for themselves whether it was relevant and useful for themselves and their institutions.

Initial evaluation at UCL was through ad hoc participant feedback - almost invariably positive - accompanied by the important metric that participants recommended the workshop to colleagues. The ABC method was piloted throughout 2015 and early 2016 in 23 sessions representing over 55 UCL module teams and some 180 faculty members. A range of disciplines was represented from medical sciences through engineering to education and social sciences. The promotion of the ABC workshop in UCL was via presentations at UCL conferences and faculty education days, through UCL’s Arena academic development centre and, as mentioned, increasingly by personal recommendation.

Participants were asked to give feedback on camera and almost without exception, participants found the experience positive, engaging and valuable. A number of key points arose from their comments. As the JISC project had found, the moderated workshop setting provides teams with “a neutral, supportive and non-threatening context for sharing ideas, away from the pressure of formal approval events and also minimising markers of staff roles and status” (Beetham, 2014). Indeed, we found the level of pedagogic sophistication expressed to be remarkably high. The format of the workshop and presence of colleagues and support staff clearly stimulated wide ranging discussions of the purpose of the module or programme, teaching methods, alternative technologies and assessment methods and above all the student experience. The storyboard approach reinforces the notion that the design is a narrative describing the student experience over time. Participants felt this would help communicate the dynamics and purposes of the module activities to students. Generally, participants appreciated the opportunity for reflection on teaching, as one put it, “a rare commodity since we are all so pressed for time”. Representative feedback comments are listed below.

‘We haven’t had such level of detailed discussion as a team. I think the structure and the materials are facilitated well.’

‘I think it was good to take a step back from the content and look at the varied type of activity.’

‘It is a good way of focusing on creating the balance within a course.’

'It makes you think about: OK, we are going to use this technique, but where, how, for what and how does it fit with everything else? And this is the way into that, I think.'

'It helped us formulate in our own mind the course structure. Yes, very useful'.

'It was an eye opener. I found it really useful to think about categorising how the learning objectives will be delivered and assessed, and examining the variety of ways that these can be achieved. It made me think more deeply about what skills the students can develop by making them responsible for their learning journey and not simply the content that needs to be delivered to them'.

Three areas, around technology alternatives, novel modes of assessment and links across module reoccurred spontaneously, with little prompting from the moderators.

'Made me more conscious of a formative assessment, which really did not occur to me before.'

'It reminds you of all different formats that you can use, rather than sticking to the same old same old.'

'This has been extremely useful. Not only that we start to think about individual modules and how we can use electronic resources, but it makes us think about the degree together, rather than as separate modules'.

Again, as predicted by JISC, and recognizing this as an 'ironic outcome of a technology-based programme', the face-to-face nature of these discussions was a key part of the engagement with and success of the process. Exactly as Viewpoints had found there was a real haptic and democratic value in "sharing physical resources that could be selected, handled, annotated and (re)situated by users allowed a collective solution to emerge in real time/space" (Beetham, 2012).

5.2 HEFCE EVALUATION 2018

As ABC grew, we felt there was a need for a more formal approach that might provide evidence for people new to the approach. Following our successful bid to the HEFCE Catalyst Fund (HEFCE 2016b), which aimed to drive innovation in the higher education sector, Digital Education and Arena worked together on the UCL Action for Curriculum Enhancement (ACE) over 18 months. The project brought together our commitment in the UCL Education Strategy 2016-21, the development and implementation of the Connected Curriculum and the ABC learning design process. A full "ACE Evaluation Report" (2018) is published on the UCL ABC web site.

The HEFCE funding enabled the UCL team to look at the effectiveness and potential impact of ABC in partnership with colleagues from UCL's Arena (educational development) team. We deliberately linked the evaluation to UCL's Connected Curriculum (CC) educational approach, considering that engagement with the learning design process was closely linked to institutional strategies and

initiatives. We also extended the evaluation to explore uptake at other UK universities. Data was gathered online survey, focus groups, and interviews. It was not feasible, as initially hoped, to investigate the student experience or the direct impact of ACE on students as the modules and programmes which staff were developing had not been running long enough to generate data on student outcomes. Nor did we have baseline (pre-intervention) data. However, we were able to explore the perceptions of UCL staff and UK educational developers from several institutions in relation to enhancement. Interviewees were motivated to choose ABC because of their positive impression of the workshop: “I saw a video online and saw people having fun, well they were smiling anyway and that looked good ... and I thought ‘ah, nice and structured’”.

In the survey of ABC participants 90% of respondents agreed that their experience of the session they attended was positive, 54% expressing strong agreement. 71% agreed that the workshop enabled them to enhance the curriculum. Interestingly only 18% thought more preparation before ABC would be useful (e.g. videos outlining the workshop and examples of student learning activities/assessment tasks). Many felt that preparation might be too time-consuming so ‘might put people off’. Interviewees valued the stimulus to design active student learning; the scope for productive interaction, where possible with the opportunity for different module teams to work together, so modules became part of a holistic programme; inclusivity in terms of adapting to the needs of course designers with different levels of experience; the well-designed resources which enabled the visualisation of modules; good, supportive session facilitators and high-quality presentations; the feeling of progress being made; and enjoyment, excitement and engaged participants.

The paper-based approach of ABC was generally liked. One interviewee commented:

‘I thought it worked really well, particularly actually having the paper, to move those bits of paper around to have a visual representation of the module I think was really, really helpful, as opposed to just sitting with a word document or just sitting round a table and discussing, but actually being able to visualise the module ... was really, really helpful’. Another commented: ‘The set up with the big posters and the post-it notes and the different colours were great, really, really helpful and people took pictures of it...’.

Many interviewees commented on the ‘buzz’ in the room and enjoyment of the ABC workshops, for example:

‘it’s just a fun workshop so it’s colourful, it’s paper based, you’re moving things around and you’re feeling things, people are excited, if there are tutors and there are many of those who actually have a fear of technology type things, well they don’t have to worry about it in a workshop like this, ... it’s alive, you can see it; people are talking and it’s great to see that...’.

However, the 90-minute format has its limitations. 64% of respondent on the survey agreed that it would be helpful to have follow up support after the workshop, such as online resources, specific feedback on the developing curriculum and more sessions for the same teams. One respondent recommended ‘a concrete list of actions generated from the workshop’ with facilitators providing

feedback on it. One learning technologist who participated observed ‘you’re going to have to have some kind of proper follow up that’s part of a consistent process, or ... nothing happens from the workshop, which is a real shame because there’s a lot of potential there and excitement’. On the other hand interviewees recognised that it would be challenging to find the time for a follow-up group session, although a ‘revisit of the initial plans a few weeks in might be a nice thing to try’ but ‘the issue of staff having time to all commit to being in one place for a whole afternoon is a big one’.

Interviewees provided several examples of the positive impact of the ABC workshop on curriculum design and enhancement. This was definitely the case in relation to student participation in the design process. They ‘contributed to the design of their own module’ and also enhanced it. The focus on different ways of learning was seen to heighten students’ awareness of the range of approaches. One participant also pinpointed enhancements in terms of students ‘working cooperatively’ and using Wikis, and less instances of students sitting passively listening to lectures. In general terms, the ABC workshop was seen to have a positive impact by one respondent, but as part of ‘a whole sweep of workshops and training events’ making it difficult to ‘disentangle and say ‘this workshop did that’”.

5.3 EVERS (2018) AND ABC ‘BUILDING BLOCKS’

In parallel with the HEFCE project, Kristy Evers, a Masters student at UCL Institute of Education completed a qualitative evaluation of the impact of ABC with two case studies, published in 2018. This involved interviews and focus groups with a total of eight workshop participants. The interview and focus group transcripts were analysed using a thematic analysis in N-Vivo. As with the HEFCE evaluation, Evers’ research found that the participants were overall very positive about the workshop, particularly about the (learner) framework, collaboration opportunities, reflection opportunities, interactive format of the workshop and the possibility to include student input in the design process. She found the workshop “likely changed participants’ attitudes around curriculum design” and suggested areas for further research. In particular she considered it worth looking into the impact the workshop in other institutions and countries and if and how their own institutional strategies are brought into the workshop. This is essentially the seed for the Erasmus+ project. In Evers’ words; “Are the ABC Curriculum Design Workshop’s building blocks able to break barriers across the board?”.

5.4 ABC BEYOND UCL

The Erasmus+ project will be discussed in detail below, but the HEFCE project provided useful feedback from other UK universities who had already adopted it. An ABC workshop for external participants was run at UCL on 9 March 2018 (a second one ran on 20 April) provided an opportunity to run a focus group with educational developers from three institutions in England and one in Scotland. All had selected ABC workshops as a catalyst for affecting strategic educational change in their universities. One university was ‘embarking on a really ambitious curriculum change programme... reviewing all of our undergraduate programmes by 2019 ... we needed something that was quick and easy to use’.

Most developers used ABC to integrate technology-enhanced learning into module design, either blended or wholly online. They worked alongside learning technologists running collaborative workshops and chose ABC because it ‘was learner-centred and ... easy for staff to work with in the time constraints’. The group made a range of positive comments about the ABC workshops. They

found the ABC format effective: 'I think it's not just hands-on but it helps people get to an end point very quickly rather than discussion going round and round for three hours ...' and powerful because 'it encourages that dialogue'. Another developer confirmed:

'...for us it was incredibly positive'. ... 'after 90 minutes we couldn't stop the academics and I don't think I've ever come across a workshop where they didn't want us to stop'. ABC workshops also 'enhanced [participants'] understanding of pedagogy ... because they're using that same language'. Participants were also enabled to 'identify what they're doing ... and that visual impact at the end very much helps them'.

This group of ABC adopters were taking a more measured approach to adoption. One institution ran ABC workshops on a rolling 'ongoing basis' with central and school-based support. Developers described running 'a refresher' if needed and seeing module developers regularly – 'they're always in touch at some point'. At another institution, the action plan generated at the ABC workshop was shared. For instance, 'one of our learning technologists definitely takes a copy ... and then will follow up ...'. The educational developers had also made purposeful efforts to embed educational strategies in their versions of the ABC workshops. ABC workshop users in one university confirmed the centrality of this approach to taking action for curriculum design: 'At our institutional review, we will be citing ABC as one of the key designs shaping and guiding our work.'

Several of the developers were certain that staff had enhanced curriculum design as a result of participation in ABC workshops. One had seen 'a shift to a more student-centred approach'. Another had observed participants coming to the realisation that 'all the acquisition was happening in the same way' which triggered the introduction of a variety of learning activities. They concluded that ABC 'enhances in just so many different ways for different programmes and different groups, whatever's right for them.' Strongest of all was the impact on a master's course with 'very low numbers'. The decision was made to move the course online and 'they used the ABC as the design vehicle, and that's seen a tremendous impact, it's enhanced the programme enough that it's made it so much more attractive and accessible to people, that the numbers have quadrupled'.

On impact of any changes or innovations on the student experience and student outcomes, 'we need the courses to run a little bit longer to see actually what impact [ABC] has had'. It was recognised 'there's so many variables – who's teaching, and you know where it was running and whether the assessment changed from one year to another, and whether one student got a bad score which brought down the whole NSS ...'. Developers were nevertheless definite that in their view ABC workshops had contributed to a more positive student experience and better student outcomes. One commented:

'... we've moved from more passive to active learning, there are definitely more opportunities in the design that we've seen going from surface to deeper learning. So the design is enhanced to enable a richer learning experience'.

There was also a perception that student engagement had increased: 'we've had very positive feedback about student engagement ... student engagement has been cited a number of times'.

The general conclusion from this stage in the evaluation was that action for curriculum enhancement is more likely to be successful if the activities staff undertake to develop professionally cohere clearly with institutional goals. Staff are often under pressure with multiple demands on their time. Initiatives which appear unrelated to strategic aims may lead to innovation fatigue and may not be sustainable. At UCL, the Connected Curriculum is a core element of institutional strategy. UK educational developers were similarly influenced by institutional strategies; these acting as an incentive to run ABC workshops. Examples were curricular review, the development of online learning and student employability.

The hands-on team-based format of the ABC workshops is motivating and enjoyable in itself and there is evidence of engagement and staff learning as a result. The problem at UCL lies in the lack of follow-up support so participants may not implement the plans they have made during workshops. UK educational developers overcame this by integrating ABC workshops into a network of module development support.

Determining direct impact on the student experience is challenging before students had completed the relevant modules, but there was a sense that the range of learning activities foregrounded through the hands-on ABC module design process had a positive effect on student learning. Strong evidence of the impact of action for curriculum enhancement was also supplied by the UK educational developers. They had adapted the ABC resources to harmonise with institutional strategies and had achieved successful outcomes as a result.

The specific recommendations arising from the HEFCE evaluation were as follows,

1. Involve staff in creative workshop activities and prioritise group discussion
2. Ensure sessions are timely and prepare participants for sessions
3. Follow up sessions
4. Integrate curriculum enhancement with institutional strategies.

5.5 ERASMUS + ABCTOVLE EVALUATION 2020

5.5.1 PROJECT EVALUATION METHODS

In early 2018 UCL Digital Education was awarded two-year Erasmus+ funding to develop ABC with 12 European universities. The Erasmus project built a strategic partnership between UCL, six other universities from the League of European Research Universities (Amsterdam, Helsinki, Leuven, Milan and the Sorbonne, with Oxford as an associate) and six innovative universities from Belgium, Denmark, Croatia, Estonia, Ireland and Romania. The project was an opportunity to evaluate ABC beyond the UK and with a wider range of institutions.

An evaluation questionnaire was agreed by the partners [link] who ran 84 ABC Learning Design workshops in 11 countries, with more than 1035 participants. Feedback was sought from over 60 of the workshops and the project team received 344 participant responses and a further 42 follow up responses about whether they had implemented their plans.. In addition, 62 facilitator surveys were received describing how the workshops had been run. The narrative below covers the main findings, the full report is available [here](#).

5.5.2 THE WORKSHOP FORMAT ITSELF

As had been seen in the 2018 HEFCE evaluation, the format itself was widely considered to be good or excellent. This is significant as the workshop by necessity has to be run by a wide range of facilitators and requires to be robust enough to respond to different presentational and facilitator styles.

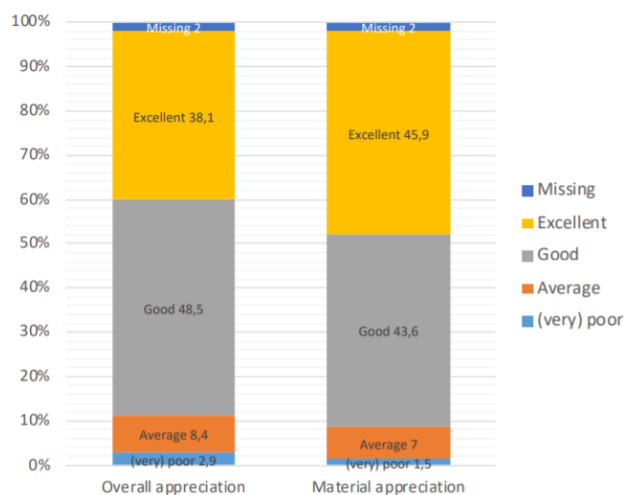


Fig 5.1 Appreciation of the format of the workshop

As mentioned above, one key indicator of success of any workshop is the likelihood of personal recommendation, and again this was found to be overwhelmingly positive.

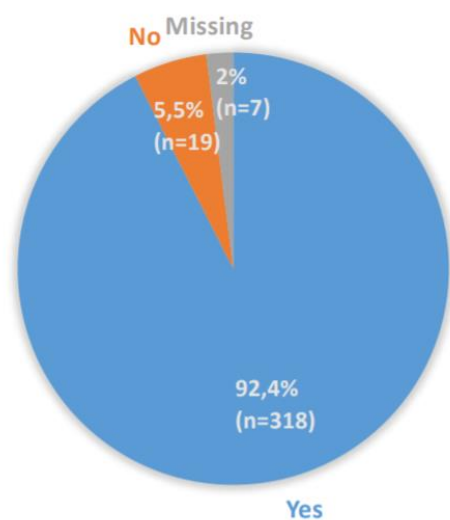


Fig 5.2 Would you recommend the workshop to a colleague?

Comments from the participants reflected these scores.

It's very hands-on and the vibe somehow makes you feel very excited about implementing the ideas that the workshop generated.

It was excellent to see a focused and well-structured meeting in action, with something of substance to show for it at the end of the session.

It provides you with a "new" way of thinking about yourself as a teacher and the design of your course.

A surprisingly quick yet efficient way to view module/programme design: very practical and gave the opportunity

To see it as a whole and at a glance, ensuring that a range of learning and assessments methods were incorporated.

It is also more activity-oriented rather than content-based way of thinking about (online) courses.

It was intense, focused, innovative and facilitated extremely well.

Fantastic tool for visualizing the course module which has led to reflection regarding the structure for different courses

5.5.2 IMPACT OF THE WORKSHOP

The workshop format is certainly engaging and enjoyable, but did it have a value beyond that to participants?

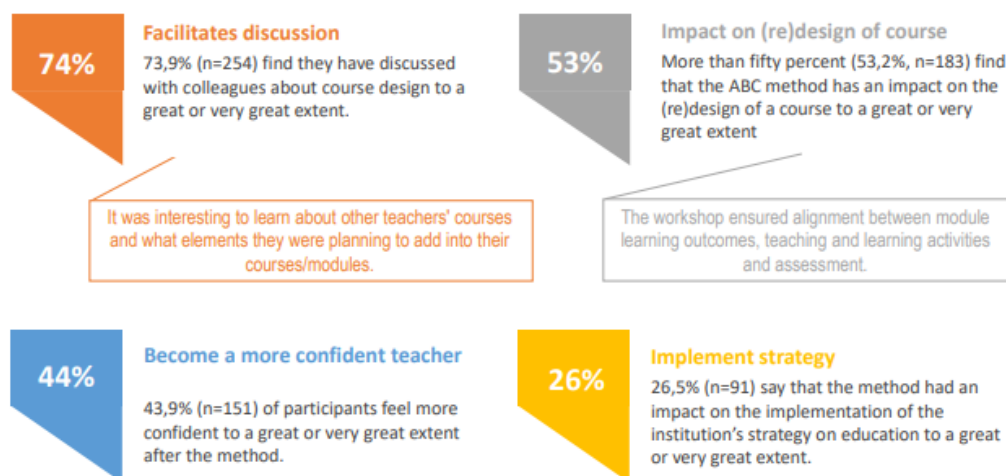


Fig. 5.3 To what extent did you reach the following outcomes by the end of the workshop?

The view of participants that the workshop facilitates discussion is not surprising, and the simple opportunity, perhaps 'permission' to discuss how to design the student journey in a non-judgmental, collegiate atmosphere is always much appreciated. A small majority found it had an impact on course redesign. Given that the workshop is about learning design, one might expect the second figure to be higher, but it should be remembered ABC is a short-form intervention with academic teams with little or no preparation. The key to raising this figure may be the follow up to the workshop. However, 'redesign' of the course in terms of changes may not be the only desirable outcome, examination and overt justification of the current course may itself be valuable. This relates to the next point. The

finding that participants feel more confident teachers after ABC is as unexpected as it is pleasing. We have often seen that the openness of ABC can help validate current practices and designs among peers. Teachers can be quite self-critical of their own methods but may find, when discussing with colleagues that the underlying rationale is quite robust and may require only minor adjustments. Thus, even if few changes are made to the design, the outcome can be satisfying. Not all workshops (at least prior to Covid) focus on implementing educational strategy or policy, so it was almost surprising that over a quarter of respondents recognised a strategic component.

Respondents were asked if ABC helped them think about the following (figures represent ‘to some extent’ or more)

- my course from students’ perspective (82.9%)
- my teaching methods (88.2%)
- educational technology (80.5%)
- my assessment and feedback methods (82.9%)
- my institution’s strategy on education (59.6%)
- the learning outcomes of the course (74.1%)

The data was corroborated with comments from respondents

It really made us think and discuss about the role of educational technology in our own classrooms, our reasons for (not) using it and the societal need to all of us to use them in our teaching.

My institution is trying to change their education and their philosophy. This could be a good tool to start a discussion.

The changes are gradual change and very much work in progress during the ongoing semester.

5.5.3 POST WORKSHOP ACTIVITIES

The project wanted to know what happened after the workshops,

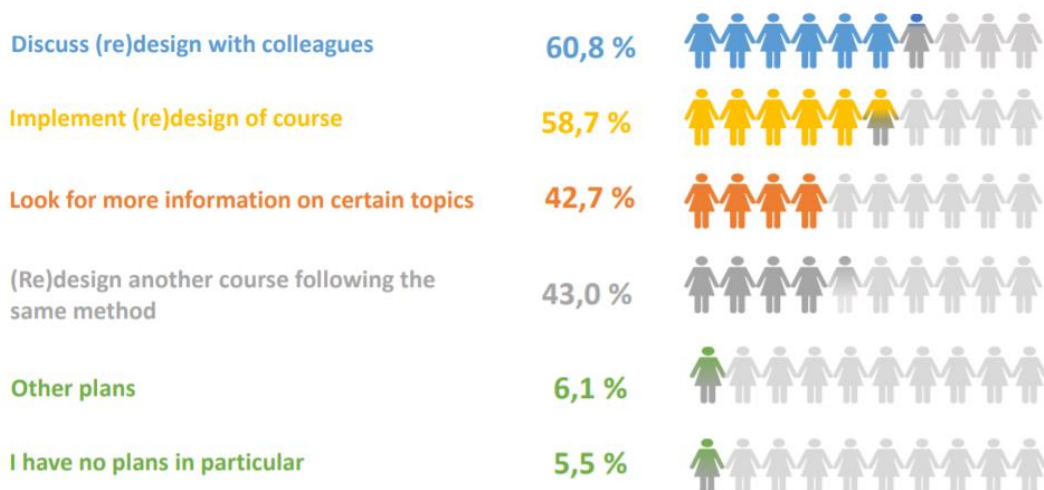


Figure 5.4 What are you planning to do with the outcome(s) of the workshop?

Participants were keen to continue the conversation with colleagues beyond the workshop itself. Although only a small majority had said earlier that workshop itself improved course design, it was encouraging that substantially more wanted to continue the (re)design of their course and many thought of applying the approach to other courses. The workshop may also provide a starting point for further staff development as participants saw the need to look for more information on certain topics. It may be reasonably concluded that the impact of the workshop for participants and teams may be enhanced by post-workshop support of various forms. In a follow-up question, 65.4% of participants wanted more discussion with colleagues and/or workshop participants and 40.1% wanted information/materials on specific topics, with a quarter mentioning follow-on training. Other topics suggested were (financial) resources, feedback and design at the programme level.

5.5.4 IMPROVEMENTS

Over all, participants were happy with the discussion with colleagues and co-development, the materials and the structure of the workshop,

‘The creative process of working as a group was essential part of the workshop which helped us to understand the method more deeply.’

‘The cards and poster part was great, it helped creativity while offering tools and facilitating the process!’

‘Simple structure of the workshop. It enables holding the attention of the participants and curiosity.’

Respondents also suggested aspects of the workshop to improve,

- Give more time for discussion
- Clarify and give background on the six learning activities
- Ask participants to come prepared with a choice for module/course to (re)design and its learning outcomes
- Shorten and focus the introduction
- Keep groups small and homogeneous
- Take time to consolidate at the end

The tension between giving enough background at the beginning of the workshop and too much introduction is always difficult to resolve. In theory participants could be given pre-workshop activities to enable a faster start, but people new to the method may not feel the need to engage and there is, at UCL at least, a certain serendipity in who turns up for the workshop. Some institutions have integrated ABC into a more formal staff development workflow, but that also depends largely on context and resources.

The evaluation also covered facilitator responses, and these can be found in the full report.

4.5 CASE STUDIES ASSOCIATED WITH THIS GUIDE

[Sorbonne - Designing blended learning using a variant of ABC](#)

[SRCE – post workshop review, Faculty of Economics and Business](#) (video 3m28s)

[SRCE – post-workshop review, Croatian Academic and Research Network](#) (video 2m30s)

[VIVES - ‘Easily, self-reliant redesigning a course’](#)

[VIVES – ‘Designing a powerful learning environment’](#)

[DCU - Using ABC to Design an Online Teaching Course for Open Online Educators](#)

[DCU Case Study: Using ABC to design a new MSC Clinical Exercise Science](#)

[Oxford – Extended interview with an ABC participant](#) (video 7m50)

REFERENCES

[Erasmus + ABC to VLE Evaluation resources](#)

Evers, K. (2018) [Breaking Barriers with Building Blocks: Attitudes towards Learning Technologies and Curriculum Design in the ABC Curriculum Design Workshop](#). *Eruditio*, Volume 2 – Issue 4, July 2018 1-16.

Hefce Catalyst programme ([Archive](#))



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Learning types, Laurillard, D. (2012).
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