Teaching professional competencies:
an exercise in module design

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Introduction

In this article I discuss and evaluate an approach to the design of an undergraduate module, based on a careful analysis of various variables affecting the design process. A special focus is put on the constructive alignment of the module aims, learning activities (including blended learning scenarios), assessment and feedback.

The module in question is a level 5 (year 2) undergraduate module titled Managing Translation, offered as a 15-credit (one-semester) core module on the BA Translation programme at London Metropolitan University. It was designed and implemented in order to address an authentic gap in current academic provision in the field of Translation, related to teaching professional competencies and workplace practices as opposed to subject-specific knowledge and skills.

Theoretical framework for module design and evaluation

Existing literature contains numerous models and frameworks for developing various types of learning experiences. One visible tendency is towards the recognition of the obvious limitations of basic, linear models for instructional design (see Toohey 1999: 21), which has resulted in the development of models that accommodate the iterative character of the design process (e.g. Moon 2001), and others which recognise the diversity of forces shaping and reshaping a curriculum, each of which may be prioritised at various times and in various circumstances (e.g. Jenkins 1998, Hartman and Warren 1994).

For the purposes of the present discussion, the model suggested by Donnelly and Fitzmaurice (2005) is employed due to its relative clarity and, at the same time, specificity with regard to the variables influencing the design process and the relationships between them. Crucially, the authors emphasise that the design process is never linear (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2005: 101), which is a better reflection of the actual thinking process behind any module design and development.

For better clarity, the model is reproduced below.

Fig. 1. Donnelly and Fitzmaurice's model of curriculum design (2005)
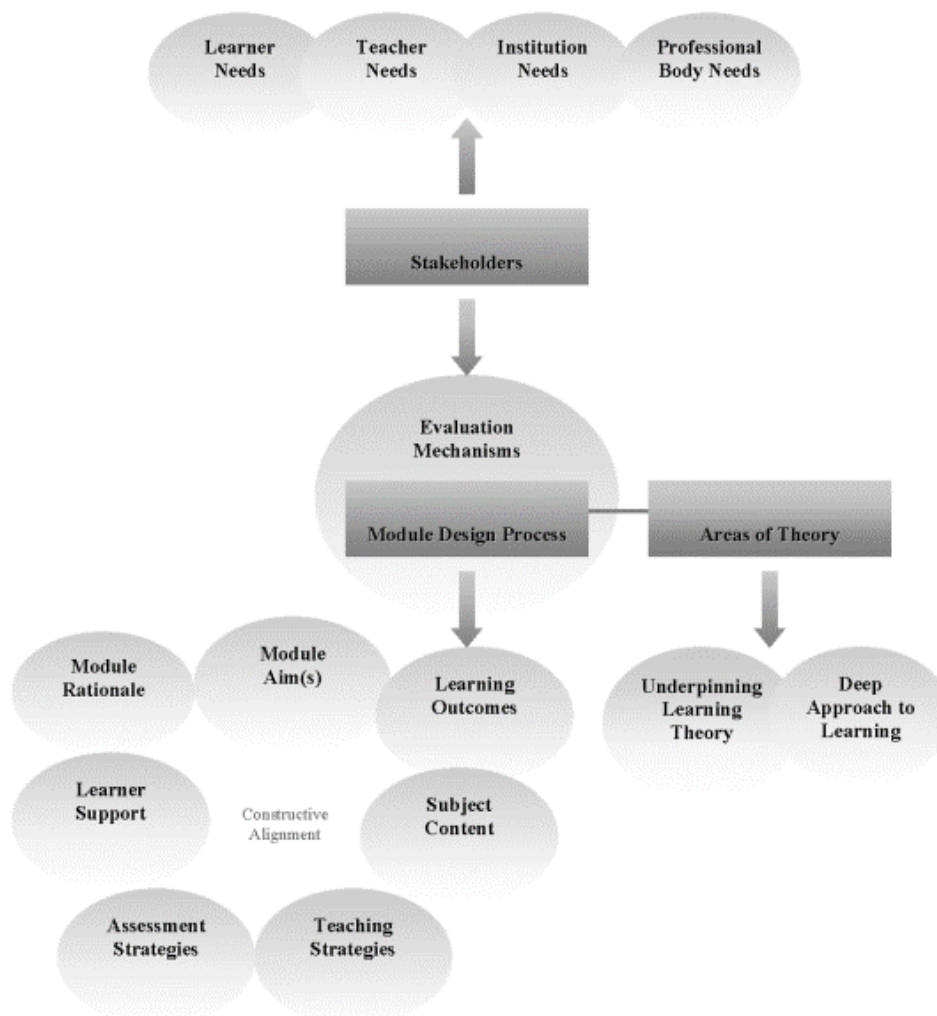
Rationale and context of the design process

The rationale and context of the design is discussed here with reference to the first part of the above model, i.e. the stakeholders.

Learner needs
As mentioned above, the module is taken by year 2 (level 5) BA Translation students. They will already have participated in several practical and theoretical modules which focus on various aspects of knowledge and skills related to translation as interlingual and intercultural mediation. While students already know how to analyse and translate certain types of non- and semi-specialised texts, they are assumed to have very limited knowledge of any other aspects of the translation profession, such as the various work scenarios in the industry and their implications, translation project management, professional bodies and support available, the value of and opportunities for CPD, ethical challenges etc. At the same time, it is assumed, based on informal feedback from students, that due to the lack of obvious, traditionally established career paths in the profession and the existence of a

number of possible career scenarios (including freelance, salaried and second-job options), they see their future entry into the professional world as a challenge and would appreciate more guidance from already established professionals or people otherwise actively involved in the industry. The module is intended to address this perceived gap.

Teacher needs
The aspect of teacher needs was addressed on two levels in the design of the module. Firstly, informal information from members of staff teaching on the BA Translation course, especially colleagues with active links to the translation industry (e.g. those who also work or have worked as freelance translators or translation project managers, or those involved in the work placement provision for students), confirmed students' lack of orientation as to their future career paths. Secondly, teacher needs were also taken into account at a later stage of the design process, when the actual content of the learning sessions was considered, especially in connection with the scheduled time of the learning sessions, that is 3 contact hours/week delivered as one block. Given this time, the sessions could not be based on the traditional lecture scenario since this would involve putting too much strain on both the instructor and the students. This potential problem was addressed by including blended learning scenarios in the module design and by basing the learning provision on the constructivist, enquiry-based approach to learning (see e.g. Hutchins 2006, and below for further details).

Institutional needs
The module is also clearly and directly related to the University and national HE goals. On the national level, it constitutes a step towards implementing the Higher Education Academy's recommendations with regard to employability defined as 'a set of achievements – skills, understandings and personal attributes – that makes graduates more likely to gain employment and be successful in their chosen occupations, which benefits themselves, the workforce, the community and the economy' (Pegg et al. 2012). Thanks to its practical dimension, it increases students' employability potential by, firstly, familiarising them with real-life dilemmas faced by professionals, and, secondly, helping students develop transferable skills of group work, reflection, research, and selection of information. At the University level, it helps to put into practice LondonMet's value of 'building careers' understood as supporting students' 'distinctive learning needs' and developing 'the specialist and generic skills that enable students to engage in rewarding careers' (LondonMet 2010). In line with this policy, the module aims to contribute to the production of graduates who are aware of the characteristics of the industry they are about to enter and capable of making informed choices with regard to their future career and its development.

Professional needs

An important rationale for the development of the module included the needs of the profession that students of the BA Translation course will eventually enter. The BA Translation course offers its participants extensive practice in applied translation, underpinned by relevant theoretical frameworks with regard to translation strategies and techniques. However, the most recent models of translator competence, developed in response to a growing professionalisation of the translation industry, emphasise the crucial role of translation service provision competencies, which include being aware of the social role of the translator and knowing how to follow market requirement, approach clients, clarify requirements, liaise with various stakeholders, follow professional standards and comply with professional ethics (e.g. Gambier et al. 2009). These competencies go beyond traditional translation teaching models which focus on interlinguistic and intercultural communication. As a result, since translation educators emphasise that 'translator education should reflect and prepare for real-life authentic practices in the translation workplace' (Kenny 2006: 26), a need was felt to accommodate these professional skills in the BA Translation course curriculum in the form of a separate module.

Areas of theory behind the module design

It is argued within HE pedagogy that teaching and learning programmes should be designed 'in order to maximise the chance that learners will experience coherence, progression and deep learning' (Donnelly and Fitzmaurice 2005: 99). The ideas that have underpinned the design of the present module include social constructivism, deep learning, active (enquiry-based) learning and constructive alignment.

The *constructivist approach* to learning and teaching is based on the assumption that people learn best by 'active construction of ideas and building of skills, through exploration, experimentation, receiving feedback, and adapting themselves accordingly' (Sharpe et al. 2006). Using authentic tasks and activities that have an identifiable link with the 'real world' can result in more effective learning and development (ibid.).

Another question that needed to be addressed in the design of the module was how its aims, learning outcomes, teaching and assessment strategies would facilitate a *deep approach to learning*. Often seen as an ideal in HE teaching and learning, the deep approach to learning is typically described in literature as characterised by an intention to understand, engage with, operate in and value the subject (CTL 2003). It includes actively seeking and understanding the subject, interacting with the content, making use of inquiry and evaluation and relating new concepts to previous knowledge (CLT 2003). Existing literature provides a number of curriculum design principles to stimulate such an approach (e.g. Entwistle 2000, Houghton n.d.), and their application in the design of the present module is discussed below.

Given the aims and envisaged content of the module, it was assumed that in order to increase students' motivation and interest in the module, the actual learning procedures should be based on the principles of **active** and **enquiry-based learning** (see e.g. Hutchins 2006), whereby students engage in practical examples, make their own decisions as to the most appropriate ways of addressing an issue, and, importantly, learn to pose their own questions and investigate possible responses. Such an approach would give students greater flexibility in focusing on the aspects of specific tasks that are most relevant to their own future development, and would create an opportunity to juxtapose the actual practices in the profession with their initial expectations.

Constructive alignment in the module design

Due to the varied nature of the module, it was important to design learning activities that would fit in well with the learning outcomes and increase students' motivation through interactivity and collaborative experience as well as creating a coherent and comprehensive learning experience. To this effect, the principles emerging from the idea of **constructive alignment** were applied (see Biggs 2005), whereby all components of a pedagogic experience such as the module aims, learning outcomes, subject content, teaching strategies and assessment strategies need to be aligned and coordinated. (See the table in the Appendix for full details of alignment in the design)

As demonstrated, the design of actual learning activities was carefully planned in order to ensure deep learning through social constructivist and enquiry-based types of activities and to stimulate the participants' interest and motivation. For example, the delivery of the module was based on inductive learning procedures, usually combined with peer collaboration, with very limited use of deductive procedures like the traditional academic lecture (see e.g. Prince and Felder 2006). These procedures provided ample opportunities for active involvement underpinned by personal interest, and students were often asked to reflect explicitly on the extent to which their investigation and inquiry process were relevant to their own needs, plans and aspirations. This proved to be very effective and, while teaching on the module, I observed that such procedures very often resulted in students' increased involvement and motivation.

Given that the structure of the BA Translation course required three contact hours per week for the module, which is relatively many, a lot of care was taken at the design stage not to overburden students with content and activities, and, at the same time, to ensure flexibility with regard to possibilities of tailoring the material to students' specific needs and interests (which, due to the professionally-oriented character of the module, were envisaged to become fully known only after the teaching began, when students started to discover the specificities of the translation

industry that they had not been familiar with). For this purpose, the use of the University's official Virtual Learning Environment (VLE), called Weblearn (based on Blackboard Learning System BBLearn 9.1), was also integrated in the module design with a view to allowing for different modes of delivery and increased elasticity whereby both students and the instructor could choose what material to include in the scenario for a given session. The VLE has been employed in two main ways:

- as a space for making available both materials for specific sessions and additional materials for further exploration by interested students (there content was produced both by the teacher and students);

- as a space for teacher and peer formative feedback (see the discussion of assessment in session 6 below).

This allowed for a greater variety with regard to the activities (since three hours are, arguably, quite excessive shortening and strenuous with regard to attention span and learning effectiveness), as students could be asked to complete some tasks independently (i.e. without direct teacher supervision) but still within the scheduled classroom time (e.g. they could be asked to do additional research in the library or computer labs and then report online). Such variety in the pace of activities - where classroom activities were usually timed, and independent activities allowed students to work at more individual speed - was believed to facilitate involvement and reflection on the content learnt.

Another way of integrating methods for stimulating motivation and deep learning is via assessment, which is not based on recall of knowledge but on students' ability to adapt and adjust the general issues discussed to their own personal circumstances. The assessment, which is a 2000-word portfolio of four elements (see fig. 2), gives students a lot of flexibility and opportunities to make choices as to the scope of their research and the content of the actual items submitted. Also, a much care has been put into ensuring that students receive enough formative teacher and peer feedback at the delivery stage; for example, they are required to post drafts of specific items on the VLE forum and provide constructive comments on their peers' posts, and they also receive teacher feedback in a similar way.

Evaluation and conclusions

The evaluation of the module was performed based on:

- the lecturer's observations of whether and how the principles underlying the design of the module are actually reflected in week-to-week classroom practice;
- the analysis of formal indicators, such as attendance;
- the analysis of content produced by the students (e.g. drafts of and peer feedback on portfolio items);
- formal (questionnaires) and informal feedback from the participants.

My observations after the first presentation of the module confirm that the introduction of the module was necessary and beneficial for the participants. The students reacted enthusiastically to the presentation of the module aims and learning outcomes as well as to the sessions, with some of them going as far as stating that they would like to be introduced to such professionally-oriented content earlier in the course curriculum, since this would allow them to understand better the relevance of some of the other modules taught as part of the programme. The attendance was steady and there was not any significant drop at any stage. The students' involvement was largely adequate, both with classroom-based and independent activities. (At the same time, in order to ensure involvement in some of the independent tasks, a system of incentives was introduced whereby students were awarded additional marks for timely participation in specific activities).

A few potentially problematic areas were identified with regard to assessment. For example, a few students reported that they felt less confident about doing research on their own and selecting relevant content, and that they wished to receive more guidance. They were given additional support and reassurance by the lecturer, which seemed to solve the problem. More importantly, while the students were introduced to the principles of reflective writing in one of the initial sessions, their actual drafts were often lacking in this respect and tended to be rather descriptive. Also, there is scope for better structuring of the peer feedback, which tended to be rather superficial, sometimes failing to identify discrepancies between the content and the assessment purpose and criteria.

Moreover, there is the issue of time pressure on the lecturer, who is now required to provide individual formative feedback on every item of the portfolio. This proved to be problematic with regard to the amount of time required, so there is definitely scope for considering a more extensive use of group feedback (where examples of effective and less effective practice are shown to and discussed with the whole class) and structured peer feedback.

Yet, despite the initial hurdles, which are hoped to be amended in future presentations of the module, this new addition to the BA Translation programme can, at this stage, be evaluated as successful. It addresses the needs of all the parties involved, and often, in the case of the participants, introduces them to aspects they did not realise before they may need to consider as future professionals. The active, enquiry-based, inductive approach implemented at the level of specific activities also proves to be effective, as evidenced in steady interest in the module and the students' active participation. In their formal feedback (module questionnaires), the participants appreciate the fact that they are given a better knowledge and skills base for their future careers and that they are shown the importance of resilience and responsibility in the planning and development of their professional careers.

Table 1 Constructive alignment in the design of the module

Module aims	Learning outcomes	Subject content and Teaching strategies	Assessment strategies
	Upon successful completion of the module students will be able to:	(examples and Ss = students)	(4 items comprising 2000-word portfolio)
1. To introduce students to various aspects of the translation project cycle (translation workflow cycle) including types of translation projects, typical work scenarios and typical professional roles in the translation industry.	- compare and contrast various types of translation work as well as roles and procedures in the translation work cycle	- Ss read/watch reports by professional translators about their career paths, reflect on their own career prospects after graduation and discuss in groups the possible scenarios - Ss identify steps necessary to achieve their goals in terms of further learning, development of skills, CPD courses, internships, work experience, business decisions etc.	Critical-reflective commentary in which Ss identify the work scenario they would like to follow in their future career and skills they still. To be supported by evidence of research into CPD opportunities.
2. To increase students' awareness of professional qualifications, training possibilities as well as professional and transferable skills and attributes needed to be employable in various roles in the translation industry.	- evaluate their professional and transferable skills and identify appropriate ways of developing these skills with a view to gaining employment in the translation industry	- Ss analyse authentic job advertisements from the translation industry and identify skills necessary for specific roles - Ss discuss ways of developing these skills and identify skills they already have - Ss write a CV and cover letter to a prospective work placement provider, outlining their skills and potential benefits from participating in the placement - Ss write a 'cold' email to a prospective employer identifying their 'Unique Selling Point' that gives them an advantage over other candidates	CV, cover letter, 'cold' email (proofread by another student)

3. To develop students' awareness and ability of dealing responsibly with ethical challenges in the translator's work.	- identify and analyse problems of ethical nature in the translation profession with a view to making informed and responsible decisions in accordance with professional standards and industry norms	- based on examples (case studies) provided by the tutor, Ss analyse and discuss ethical challenges in translator's work and identify methods of looking for solutions (including both formal and informal channels, e.g. industry codes of conduct and advice from more experienced colleagues via web forums respectively)	Critical-reflective commentary on research into translation codes of conduct in Ss' other language countries (i.e. non-UK) and their usefulness in solving translator's typical dilemmas Critical-reflective commentary on ways of resolving a chosen ethical dilemma, based on case studies discussed in class
4. To develop students abilities of self-evaluation and critical reflection on their professional performance in various roles in the translation industry.	- produce and update reflective commentaries on their progress and achievements positing future directions with regard to skills development and managing their future professional career in the translation industry	As shown above, this aspect underpins the whole of the learning and teaching provision in the module.	

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