

Title: Mass Market Means Low Quality. Right?

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Introduction

Wrong!

One comment I have heard many times over the years – and I tire of it – is ‘that on-line distance programmes are generally addressing a mass market need therefore they must be of low quality’.

This is a *non sequitur*. The very fact that many distance programmes are aimed at a mass market suggests strongly that they have to be of a *very high quality* in order to be able to satisfy the exacting needs that market. Anyone who has ever launched a low quality product into the market knows that it stands or falls on its level of quality and fitness for purpose, and generally falls.

An earlier Briefing Paper (*‘Treat all your students as distance learners’*) highlighted the fact that many distance programmes have actually benefited their students from a fresh design, a holistic development strategy and delivery potential to improve the overall student experience. Quality is vital and there are at least four areas where it is crucial to address the needs of a mass market, and where this quality is really felt:

1. Pedagogical & curriculum design;
2. Learning architectures and delivery;
3. Information architectures and content management;
4. Integrated administration systems.

The above comment tends to be made by people who have not looked at the distance offerings around today, and who are tainted by a belief that ‘distance is bad’. In a sense this is odd because there have been many good distance programmes around for very many years, not least from the Open University which has been offering programmes and content of undoubted quality for many years. Many professional associations, too, have continued the development of their quality education services into the distance and on-line market.

There is some truth to the comment, though, particularly in those establishments who develop ‘e-learning’ programmes in an *ad hoc*, individually subjective, non-strategic manner often driven by the capabilities (or lack of them) of the delivery technologies.

Pedagogical & curriculum design

I was, perhaps naively, surprised to find out that a number of our UK universities do not have any institutionally-wide accepted Teaching & Learning strategies. Ironically the one issue that is causing most institutions to actually devise such strategies is ‘e-learning’ (though, more precisely, the development of distance and/or on-line courses). The story is better in the professional associations, who seem to have a tighter rein on the approach to their learning services.

It is less of a surprise, therefore, that pedagogical and curriculum design – in higher education at least – is a hot topic. There is a lot of choice – constructivism,

communities of practice and collaboration – examples of didactic and behaviourist approaches to learning. There is also a vast amount of learning theory underpinning developments, but what is most important is that a better articulation of different pedagogical processes, and their mapping onto tools and techniques, leads to a practical pedagogic approach and subsequent implementations.

A number of accepted approaches can be taken, each requiring an attention to detail in order to ensure that quality results:

- User-centred – where users must become involved in the design process somewhere. It is important here that the chosen design works well with a *variety* of users, and that their input be continually solicited to assist in course maintenance and revision.
- Design-centred – where tutors should be actively involved in the process to suggest the nature of the materials, the mode of operation and the level of interactivity between students and tutors. It is perhaps dangerous to rely solely on the tutors to do this as they tend not to be technical, or even learning, specialists in this area, and it is also not uncommon to find universities and professional associations using outside vendors to provide materials and structures.
- Teacher-centred -- a design centered on a teacher's preferences with respect to materials and activities. Teachers, however, often maintain the educational orientation that is most familiar or comfortable for them, which is not necessarily the most effective for distance and/or on-line delivery which tends to require comprehensive and consistently structured materials, of high quality and rich variety.
- Learner-centred – while it is generally accepted that there is no single model for on-line distance learning, a safe bet for a 'best' approach might be learner-centric, where students' preferences are the determining factors in the overall design. This implies that tutors and/or materials developers need to consider students first in course and curriculum design, if only to ensure that they offer a degree of choice in the delivery to allow the student to make best personal use of the materials within their study patterns.

Whichever approach is taken it is a fact that there is more course planning taking place than before. This is not limited to simply limited to what types of materials will be used, but expanded to include how much and what types of interactivity will engage learners with materials and tutors. There is also a drive to include more constructivist and behaviorist approaches in distance programmes, to ensure that students add to what they already know by applying what they are learning and to provide students with materials through they might explore and understand key concepts.

Of course, it can be argued that this level of thought and planning has always gone into curriculum and programme design, but it would be wrong to deny that the enhanced visibility offered by distance and on-line learning, and that the more exacting requirements of off-campus students, has not accelerated this process. In one university where I worked there was a very good document on Curriculum Design but when we designed the on-line distance MBA programme I suspect I was one of the first people to really read this guide and use it.

Course and curriculum design must reflect the students' progression through a series of carefully created and monitored learning experiences. This is an essential

for mass market delivery and acceptance, but it should also be a quality measure taken by all programmes.

Learning architectures

E-learning – a term with a potentially very wide definition – is carried out in every learning institution today, often developing content that is *instructional* (for building skills and capabilities) or even *informational* (delivering information) in nature. Most e-learning falls into the latter category typically using text, graphics, audio and some interactivity (e.g. in on-line testing) to engage users, but generally not involving decision-making, simulations, blended learning, or other techniques which are important in the development of developing new skills. Indeed many uses of e-learning equate to using the institutional VLE as a glorified ‘file store’ on which to post Word and PDF files and Powerpoint slides. There are many such tools around today that support a ‘rapid e-learning’, or publishing, model but with ease of development comes a potential lack of focus – focus on the fitness of the content over its eye-catching form.

As it becomes easier to develop programmes with rich and exciting content, it also becomes easier to overdo the development, particularly with respect to the range of options available. Programme managers and their designers need a focus for their efforts, particularly the large team efforts.

This is where it is important of to have a formal Learning Architecture, even if it is a fairly simple one. There are examples of what we mean to be found in the Feb 2008 Briefing Paper, *Assessments, Learning Objectives & Progress Reports*.

A ‘learning architecture’ is a framework offering guidelines for the structure and use of different types of content and delivery options – a template in fact. This is of great use while developing a programme, as it ensures that all contributors are clear on what is expected of them – and it should include quality measures too – but it also helps that students who use the materials to appreciate and understand exactly how to use them to best effect. The architecture serves as a guide for content development and delivery.

It also helps to phase in the inevitable changes in technologies as it keeps the focus on business objectives, the student needs, and the implementation of content strategies around standards.

Information architectures and content management

These Briefing Papers are not intended to market CAPDM the company, but they can mention the origins of the name of the company, i.e. CAPDM the information flow model shown in figure 1 at the end of this paper (See also [CAPDM Model](#)).

This information flow model now looks fairly commonplace but it is important to understand why it is of value, including in the area of learning. It represents a discipline followed by many large scale electronic publishing works we were involved in during the late 1980s. This work showed that there were distinct, but repeated, steps involved in the overall process of content creation, management and delivery.

The model helped us to:

- Avoid taking a disparate approach to each activity;
- Take a strategic view to the overall workflow and problem of content management in particular;
- Map tools and the use of information standards onto each process, but without being locked into a specific technology set;
- Communicate the process and its needs to content contributors.

As many organisations today are now struggling with the problem of content management and publishing to the range of formats expected by their markets, the CAPDM model has helped to devise formal work flows, recognise information standards that support formal information architectures that can capture and represent the content domain, and to map the use of suitable – if transient – technologies.

These technologies can be unavoidably complex and this can result in difficulties of use, which – most crucially – means that the ‘solutions’ are often poorly employed. This last point is important when quality is a goal.

The CAPDM model is recognizable in today’s Enterprise Content Management (ECM) – a concept that means different things to different people, but in essence it is about helping everyone in an organisation to manage (‘find, use, share and keep’) content, particularly unstructured information. ECM generally includes processes to streamline the publication, and improve the quality, of information, but it can also refer to the automation of specific business processes – e.g. creating, editing or publishing documents – and to the management of information.

The CAPDM model is certainly about content management (the CM part) and naturally fits in at any level of use – including the enterprise (the E part).

Neither ECM nor CAPDM are about software, though there is obviously going to be software and systems in the implementation of each, but each is really an organised and systematic approach to the management of information. In developing distance programmes, built on an information asset approach, it is important that this discipline is able to combine a wide variety of technologies and technical components – able to be used as stand-alone systems if need be – without necessarily adopting a single enterprise-wide system. The key to this was the wholesale adoption of international standards for information, specifically XML and some of its relatives.

Our use of XML and its related technologies has been written about many times in the past, but we are continually, and pleasantly, surprised by the way that good semantic mark-up of content can be continually mined to drive the development of new, enhanced functionality. It continues to offer a wealth of opportunity, and will be the subject of a future Briefing Paper. Obviously with some foresight, some unknown author wrote:

‘XML and SGML documents have for many years, been using semantic tags to unambiguously flag specific pieces of text for future discovery’.

Integrated administrative systems

Finally, in our short tour of where quality is (or should be) added in to distance programmes, I note that many universities have struggled in recent years to integrate

their institutional VLEs to the MIS department databases that exist in every institution. This, however, is just a technical challenge that will be overcome. More important is the integration of the processes of administration required for learner-centric on-line and distance programmes, and in a manner that brings an operational efficiency and effectiveness that allows these programmes to scale.

The on-line distance programme at Heriot-Watt University peaked at some 8,500 students recently, but its administration still managed to maintain a highly individual-orientated perspective which is very different from the more traditional approach that favours administrative processes for the sake and benefit of the institution. In this way the Heriot-Watt programmes are highly student driven, very flexible and definitely geared to providing quality support and administration to a mass market.

This development challenged the traditional administrative approaches of other institutional programmes where many simply did not support the individual student perspective that distance learning requires. It naturally included an entirely paperless approach, and achieved a complete integration of all the business and academic processes alongside the development of a highly personalised learning environment. This not only ensured that the 'mass' delivery worked effectively, but also resulted in a truly integrated, consistent and comprehensive learning environment which is highly praised by the students. It is a true enhancement of the overall student learning experience sought by all HE institutions. Professional associations are similarly bridging from their traditional use of member service databases into a more highly integrated learning-orientated administration.

In short, the move to 'mass' can be equated to an overall improvement in quality.

Conclusion

The mere fact that a distance and/or on-line programme is offered on a wide scale does not necessarily imply 'quality', but it certainly implies that the opportunity has arisen for quality to be explicitly addressed. This is almost certainly the case with the mature programmes we see being offered by our universities – exemplified by the quality that the Open University has been renowned for over the years – and by the professional associations that have developed a distance and on-line reach.

It is hard to accept the claim that mass market implies lower quality. Put it to the test: look at the features of the mature distance programmes that have sustained themselves over the last few years and see the quality that that has been a factor in their success.

Footnote

The accepted definition of ECM was created by the Association for Information and Image Management International – the worldwide association for enterprise content management – in 2000, and it incorporated the following five components:

- Capture
- Manage
- Store
- Preserve
- Deliver

In autumn 2005 AIIM re-defined ECM as follows:

'Enterprise Content Management is the technologies used to Capture, Manage, Store, Preserve, and Deliver content and documents related to organizational processes'.

This obvious similarity adds legitimacy to the CAPDM model which dates back to the late 1980s.

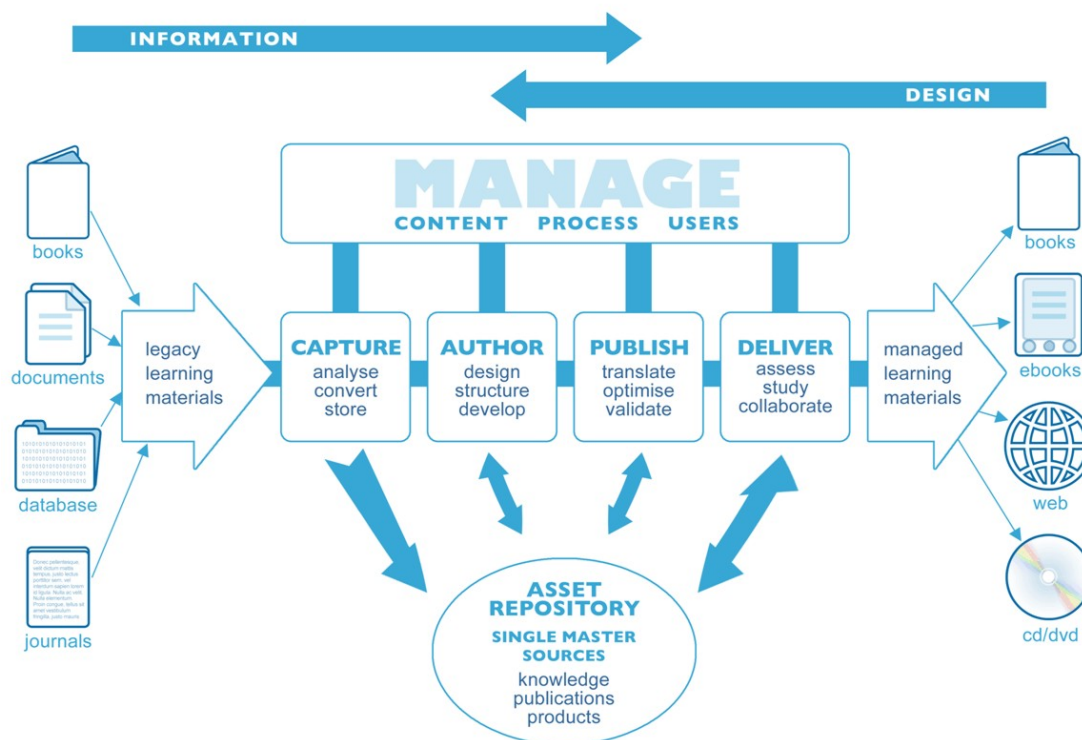


Figure 1: The CAPDM Model

CAPDM provides a range of professional services that help professional associations and education providers to develop successful businesses in education. Visit us on-line at www.capdm.com for more information.