University of Edinburgh

MSc in Digital Education

Course Design for Digital Environments

A Reflective Account of my Learning Event

‘Pro-Active Happiness’

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Word limit 1000(+/- 10%)

Word Count: **1095**

‘Pro-Active Happiness’ Learning Event – A reflective account

Access to LE: https://www.moodle.is.ed.ac.uk/course/view.php?id=335

My learning event aimed to be **enjoyable** while **empowering participants to be more pro-active about their own happiness**, a legitimate goal in my professional life-coaching practice**.** Establishing a supportive and safe online space for exploratory introspective work was an unstated aim.

Learning Outcomes (LO)

Students are expected to

1. relate relevant concepts to their own life to create and physically apply a small happiness intervention in a personally relevant area of their life,
2. draw conclusions from reflecting on their experience to improve future action(s)
3. develop a motivating personal strategy to stay pro-active about their well-being beyond the learning event

To reach LO’s, my participants needed to actively (re-)make meaning from personal experience. Considering learning as process, I combined a learner-centred cognitivist/constructivist approach with Kolb’s (1993) experiential learning cycle promoting learning-how-to-learn and learner autonomy, deploying design principles such as interaction, choice, transformation of experimental discovery and reflection (Mayes and deFreitas 2004). Self-determination theory (Ryan and Deci 2000) guided my choice of activities satisfying either learner’s autonomy, mastery or relatedness needs at all times to maintain intrinsic motivation. I was present and supportive via forum posts, audio feedback and video messages throughout. To minimize technology issues, I used Moodle, a platform familiar to participants.

Reflection on Results:

Assessment/constructive alignment

Using formative feedback, self-assessment and absence of grading seemed suitable for coaching personal real-life experiences. Despite my perceived constructional alignment of LO’s with methods and assessments (Biggs 1996) in the planning stage, LO3 emerged mis-aligned after a technology-driven last-minute assessment change in the design phase, while word choice of LO1 unintentionally only allowed outcome success not experimentation. Re-evaluation of alignment at every stage may have prevented this.

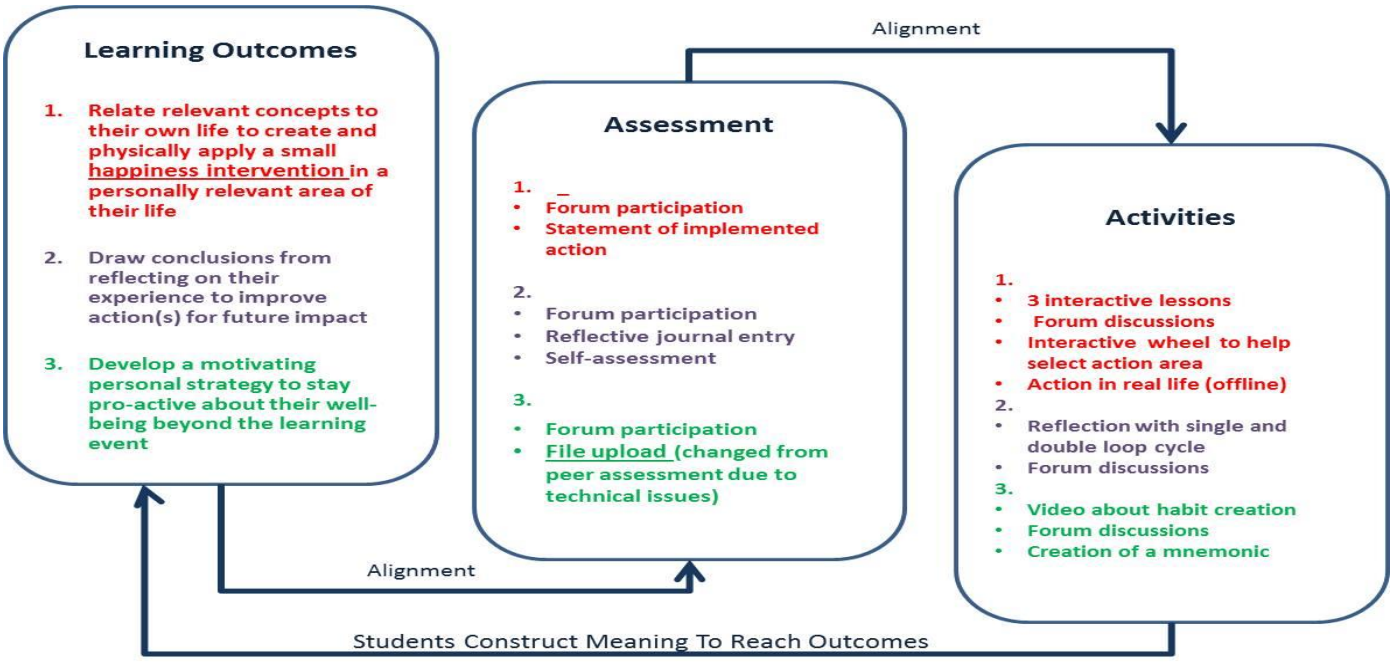

Figure 1: Constructive Alignment

My event was both success and failure. Interaction and feedback indicated high engagement and enjoyment probably driven by my presence, emotional support and rigorous pre-planning towards motivation? My subconscious assumptions, fears and last-minute-changes, however, inhibited my participants' reaching the learning outcomes as detailed below.

Subconscious Assumptions:

- SUCCESS: I could change participants' approach to happiness experiencing one successful happiness action.
- RELEVANCE: Happiness is a personally relevant topic for everyone, providing initial intrinsic motivation and a desire for deep learning .
- REFLECTION TIME: Providing dedicated time for reflection would allow participants to transform experience into (deep) learning.
- MY ROLE: I would only be respected if, on top of being an empathetic supporter, I would come across as expert in 'pro-activeness happiness'.

Success-assumption:
LO's and aim proved too ambitious. I failed to notice the warning signs: complex LO's as per SOLO taxonomy (Biggs 1982), participants' exclamation 'Wow and you will teach us all that?' and the number of activities needed. By inadvertently choosing a transformative, troublesome and counter-intuitive threshold concept (Meyer and Land 2006, Land et al 2005) of 'pro-active happiness', I probably set my learners up for failure. While Perkins (1999) recommends constructivist approaches for troublesome knowledge, an outcome-based approach was potentially unsuitable (Land et al 2005, p. 59) due to the complexities of transformation. A single learning activity for practice and reflection proved insufficient for building mastery towards a threshold concept and reaching LO1, despite all participants implementing their self-chosen action. I had not planned for failure to increase happiness, revealing my difficulty to remember my own 'messy journey back and forth across conceptual terrain' (Cousin 2005, p.5) prior to grasping the threshold concept.

From a motivational angle, I seemed to be able to offset my students' missed mastery gain with providing relatedness through supportive feedback.

Relevance-assumption:
Under a false-consensus bias (Ross et al 1977) my participants surprisingly wouldn't show the same initial enthusiasm to increase pro-active happiness as myself but had other priorities in their lives. While it is student responsibility to construct their own meaning (Rovai 2004) my experience confirms Perkins (2006, p.36): 'however constructivist the teaching, disinterested students may still adopt a surface approach'. Without my bias, I could have addressed this through the design by better applying the constructivist principle of establishing pre-knowledge and context (Rovai 2004 p.81, Alexander and Boud 2001, p.8). Instead of the ice-breaker discussion around 'happy moments', I should have allowed participants to negotiate personally relevant goals in a learning contract.

Reflection-assumption:
I (only) designed a single reflection activity post action. Journal entries revealed that single and double loop reflection (Argyris and Schoen 1974) stayed on the shallow level reminiscient of 'thoughful action' (Mezirow 1990, p.6). Were my guiding diagrams (see figure2) little more than 'recipe-following' (Boud 1999, p.125), insufficient to support transformation of experience into learning (Kolb 1993)? Did I expect them to self-coach themselves despite discomfort and reflect without explicit assessment criteria? Time for reflection is necessary (Boud 1999, p.124), yet seemingly not sufficient for learning. Denying them a follow-up opportunity for practice cut the learning cycle short; my formative audio feedback thus merely served as emotional support saving self-esteem.

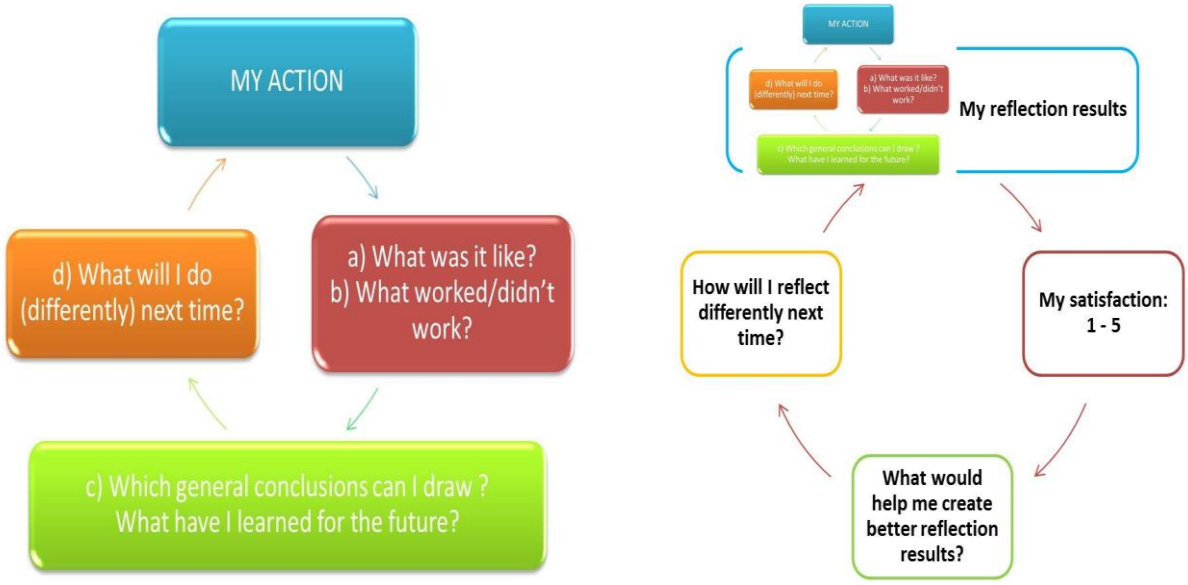

Figure2: Instructional Reflection Cycles

Role-assumtion:

Eager to appear as subject expert focused on content and results rather than supporting the learning process with powerful questions, I failed to empower my participants. Ignoring the constructivist focus on learning rather than teaching (Rovai 2004 p.90) is a common mistake of novice coaches trying to prove their worth by helping the client reach a particular outcome, thereby playing it safe and small, rather than listening and challenging the client to develop sustainable self-coaching and reflection skills. With my first-ever online event, I have disappointingly fallen into the 'novice' pattern. My behaviour might have communicated that I did not consider my participants capable of owning their own learning. I thwarted my aims through my subconscious anxieties.

Re-running the event, I would re-examine the validity of outcomes for transformational experiential learning. Could metacognitive strategies or processes ever qualify as outcomes? I would better manage participants' expectations around threshold concept, the necessity to fail to learn, responsibility for learning, assessment criteria and support. I would activate participants' pre-knowledge about **pro-active** happiness, while letting them negotiate learning contracts with personally relevant goals (Toohey 1999). I would increase opportunities for practice and better support single and double loop reflection in- and on-action (Schoen 1984) throughout the entire event. As a co-active partner, I would prioritise powerful questions over solutions.

I feel humbled. My rigorous planning, while essential (Rovai 2004, p.82), is no guarantee for success. Executed design, delivery and student experience easily deviate from original intention. Misalignments unforgivingly hide till it's too late. Pre-testing seems imperative (Alexander and Boud 2001, p.11). I am startled by the overarching impact my subconscious assumptions and anxieties had on the event; group design and peer review will be critical to unearth and challenge them earlier.

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