Sharing and reuse of learning designs for English Studies: A UK Higher Education perspective

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This paper describes the findings of work undertaken to explore the key issues associated with the sharing and reuse of digital learning materials and learning designs among lecturers in the field of English studies in Higher Education contexts in the United Kingdom. An online survey focusing on reuse of learning materials was carried out at three nominated universities: Leicester, Oxford and Oxford Brookes. A 'core group' of participants then developed a number of LAMS sequences, and four of them ran at least one sequence with their students. Both lecturers and students provided feedback on these experiences. In addition, five of the 'core' participants each reviewed a sequence written by another member of the group, exploring the potential for reusing that sequence in his/her teaching. The results indicate that a nascent culture of sharing does exist amongst 'English' academics, despite the readily identifiable barriers that exist. The LAMS sequences that were designed with sharing in mind hold considerable potential for capturing and modelling pedagogical practice, as does the tool itself.

Keywords: sharing, reuse, learning designs, LAMS sequences, humanities, English studies

Introduction

Over the last six years the English Subject Centre (part of the Higher Education Academy's network of 24 Subject Centres supporting the teaching of English literature, language and Creative Writing in UK Higher Education) has sponsored more than twenty e-learning projects in the English subject community. In 2002 and 2005 national scoping studies of e-learning in the subject looked at the uptake, perceptions and uses of e-learning in the subject from a practitioner perspective. Results of these studies suggest that the availability of Virtual Learning Environments (VLEs) and the use of digital resources in teaching have become almost ubiquitous in departments across the UK (Lucas, 2006). Apart from a growing number of enthusiasts, however, individual practitioners have either been reluctant to engage with e-learning at all or have not yet moved beyond replicating face-to-face practice online.

During the same period 'e-learning infrastructure' in the UK has attracted significant investment by the Government. The development of sustainable e-learning models based on sharing and reuse of learning objects is also being encouraged, and the growth in learning object repositories at both institutional and national level in the UK is one example of this. These changes in the teaching environment are occurring at such a pace that many academics, particularly in humanities disciplines like English, are cynical, unaware or unprepared for the new kinds of pedagogies and work methods that are becoming possible. For example, although it has been proposed that sharing learning materials and learning designs leads to the dissemination of good practice (Littlejohn, 2003; Beetham, 2004; Britain, 2004), there has hitherto been little evidence in the Higher Education sector of what one might call a 'culture of sharing: making learning materials that one has created oneself available *for widespread use* by other practitioners and, conversely, reusing material produced by others.

Given this environment, and the availability of Joint Information Systems Committee (JISC) funding for e-learning projects which focused on cultural issues and subject differences, the Subject Centre launched a project to explore the suitability of the Learning Activity Management System (LAMS) as a vehicle for the sharing and reuse of learning designs, and as a driver for innovation in e-learning pedagogy for English studies at HE level in the UK. This project was funded through the JISC Distributed e-Learning Programme (2005) and ran concurrently with a JISC-funded trial of LAMS in UK post-compulsory education (Masterman & Lee, 2005). The research questions were:

- 1. What perspectives do practitioners hold regarding the reuse of learning materials?
- 2. How do practitioners in university English departments and undergraduate students reading English
 - respond to LAMS? Specifically, how do tutors react to the experience of:
 - Reviewing a specific learning design for possible reuse?
 - Designing a sequence of learning activities that others might use as well?
- 3. How do students respond to learning through LAMS?

Method

The study was carried out at three universities in the UK: Leicester, Oxford and Oxford Brookes. The first stage of the research involved surveying the general population of lecturers in English Language and Literature at these universities, and the second was a practical investigation into reuse.

Survey

To elicit the key issues associated with sharing and reuse of e-learning resources among lecturers, an online survey was administered to teaching staff and, in the case of Oxford University, graduate research students. The questions were designed to elicit:

- The extent to which practitioners already reused learning materials in their teaching;
- The means by which they obtained such materials;
- The extent to which they were prepared to share their own materials with other teachers;
- Any concerns which they had about the sharing of materials.

Practical investigation

This stage of the study involved a small 'core group' of seven participants at each of the three nominated universities: three staff from OUCS, one postgraduate student at Oxford who had worked as an English teacher, two staff from Oxford Brookes (working together) and one from Leicester. They were recruited through personal contact from the principal investigator. The investigation consisted of three parts.

1. Authoring LAMS sequences

Participants developed at least one LAMS sequence on a topic related to their area of interest, working either independently or with a colleague. They were instructed to design the sequence in such a way that it could be reused by other tutors, either verbatim or with modifications (eg to accommodate different content). In total, eight sequences were developed, of which five were used in parts 2 and 3 (see Table 1). The sequences were hosted on a LAMS server at Oxford University. Members of the core group were invited to review each others' sequences on the survey at their leisure, but were instructed to ensure that they did *not* look at one of the sequences (it did not matter which one). This was to avoid compromising the third part of the investigation.

2. Running LAMS sequences with students

Students at each of the three universities worked through one sequence (two sequences at Oxford Brookes) written by their tutor. The students also gave feedback on their affective responses to the experience. The method of data collection was not predetermined by the investigating team, but was devised by each tutor. The data collection instruments comprised the standard set of questions included in the LAMS Survey tool (Leicester), a questionnaire composed by the tutor (Oxford Brookes) and an asynchronous discussion between tutor and students (Oxford).

Author	Sequence title	Purpose	
TB1+TB2*	Approaching a short poem	Approach and interpret a short poem in	
		different ways; e.g. critical reading and creative	
		rewriting	
TB1+TB2*	Sense and nonsense in narrative	Explore the nature of narrative, through	
		experimenting with the making of sense and	
		nonsense in words and film.	
TL1*	Medieval lyrics	Walk students through the processes involved	
		in analysing an unseen passage in an exam	
TO3+TO4*	Introduction to manuscript studies	Develop basic skills in editing manuscripts	
TO1*	Close reading of a generic text	Develop basic skills in close reading of a text.	
		This is designed to be used asynchronously.	
TO1	Editing practice: 'Dulce et Decorum est'	Develop basic skills in editing using primary	
		source material	
TO1	Close Reading: 'Break of day in the	Develop close reading skills using Isaac	
	trenches'	Rosenberg's poem. This is designed to be used	
		asynchronously.	
TO2	Introduction to the life, times and poetry	Walk students through a close textual analysis	
	of William Blake	of the poem 'London.'	

Table 1: LAMS Sequences developed for the project

* Described and/or reviewed during the interviews and think-aloud protocols.

3. Eliciting tutors' feedback

In this part of the investigation, interviews were conducted with five members of the core group (two participants from OUCS, TO3 and TO4, were omitted as they had not had any recent teaching experience). They were questioned in depth about i) their attitudes towards the reuse of learning materials and ii) the approach which they had taken in designing their LAMS sequence(s). In addition, they reviewed a LAMS sequence which had been written by another member of the group and which they had not previously looked at. Their thoughts on the potential for reusing that sequence in their own teaching were captured using a think-aloud technique and recorded on tape for subsequent transcription.

These participants had also completed the 'design questionnaire' that had been used in the evaluation of the LAMS practitioner trial. This was intended as a reflective log in which participants i) recorded their decisions, actions and responses as they progressed through the design task and ii) gave feedback on their overall experience of using LAMS and the prospects for its future use in their institution.

Results

General perspectives on reuse and sharing

Data in this section are based on responses to the online survey on sharing and reuse, which was completed by a total of 32 teaching staff from the three universities and 28 graduate students from the University of Oxford. It relates to their perspectives on sharing and reuse in general.

Fifty-two respondents stated that they currently incorporated materials created by others into their teaching (or, in the case of those postgraduates without teaching experience, stated that they would incorporate such materials), with the majority (60%) doing so between 5% and 20% of the time. The extent of reuse could be affected, inter alia, by the paucity of materials available for minority subject areas such as Old English and by the limited range of types of artefacts on offer (sometimes only course outlines and reading lists were available). The main reason for *not* reusing others' materials was a preference for creating one's own material from scratch.

The most prevalent forms of reuse amongst survey respondents were the adaptation of existing materials to fit one's own teaching (81% of respondents) and the use of using existing materials as a source of ideas

only (76%). Direct incorporation of existing materials into one's own teaching without modification was relatively uncommon (12%).

The learning materials that are most reused are primary texts, secondary research texts, images and reading lists, as Table 2 shows.

Type of learning material	% of all	% of tutors	% of
	respondents	N = 31	postgraduates
	reusing this type		N = 26
	N = 57		
Secondary research texts	78.9%	74.2%	84.6%
Primary texts	77.2%	80.6%	73.1%
Images	71.9%	80.6%	61.5%
Reading lists	70.2%	54.8%	88.5%
Exam questions/assignment	56.1%	45.2%	69.2%
topics			
In-class activities/exercises	29.8%	32.3%	26.9%
Handouts	28.1%	35.5%	19.2%
Course syllabi	24.6%	16.1%	34.6%
Audio clips	22.8%	32.3%	11.5%
Film/video clips	22.8%	32.3%	11.5%
Out of class activities	10.5%	6.5%	15.4%
Lecture notes and/or slides*	8.8%	3.2%	15.4%

Table 2: Types of learning materials reused by respondents

* Including lecture notes taken by respondent when a student.

Although Internet search engines and websites were widely used in sourcing materials for possible reuse, 'social' contacts were particularly highly valued. For example, one questionnaire respondent noted:

I think of sharing in terms of people I know — material only really makes sense in context of a larger conversation. Other people's prepared material is often a bit useless if you're not personally engaged with it/them (no matter how good it is).

Turning to respondents' willingness to make their own learning materials available for use by others, 82% of respondents were prepared to share with colleagues in their home institutions and 75% were prepared to share with practitioners in other universities. Again, acquaintance with the would-be 're-user' was considered important; as one respondent commented: 'I would rather share my material with people who I know and believe to be good teachers who will use it well and responsibly.'

Print remained a preferred medium for making one's learning materials available, although VLEs (in the 'home' institution), Web sites and online repositories were also considered acceptable. 'Local' repositories were preferred to national ones, one tutor going as far to comment in the questionnaire that he had 'no interest really in a national repository unless funding demanded it.'

The principal barriers to the sharing of learning materials included pragmatic difficulties (teaching material is contextualised to the class and tutor), concerns over the individual's reputation (the materials are not fully representative of their teaching and scholarship) and the privileging of research over teaching. Interestingly, copyright issues were considered to be relatively minor impediment.

The experience of reuse

To understand the process of reviewing for reuse, we synthesised data from four think-aloud protocols. Participants started each think-aloud by logging into LAMS in Author mode and choosing their unseen sequence from the list of titles displayed. Since the title and metadata were reviewers' first points of contact with the sequence, their role in helping them to determine whether the sequence was going to be of interest was crucial (see Figure 1 for an example).

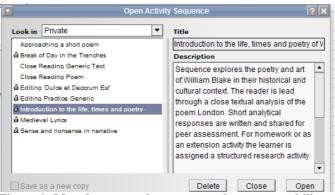
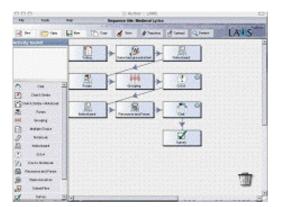


Figure 1: Metadata on each sequence enhances reusability

As TB2 commented, the challenge with metadata is:

to describe something in a way which is going to be usable for different people coming to the resource for different purposes, and this is an art. [...] it's got to tell you something about the task, [...] the subject-matter, [...] enough contextual information and enough about the structure to enable you to make a decision 'Do I proceed or not with this particular resource?' and that's a very difficult thing to do.

Having opted to investigate a particular sequence further, participants were then presented with a graphical overview of the activity. This overview allowed them to see whether the structure matched their own teaching approach (see Figures 2 and 3).



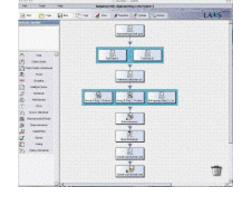
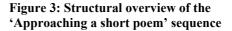


Figure 2: Structural overview of the 'Medieval lyrics' sequence



TO1's initial reaction to the 'Medieval lyrics' structure illustrates this approach well:

I can see there are 10 activities, nicely laid out. It starts off with a vote, which is quite interesting. Some background information, the Noticeboard will give me some information about it; a Forum, a discussion there. [...] So this looks like it's got an interesting mixture – just the icons show there's a nice spread of things and then it finishes with a survey.

For TB1 and TB2, the arrangement of the activities in the graphical overview was also important, and the cross-like shape of their activity structure (Figure 3) was no accident. They were thus bemused by the zigzag layout of 'Medieval lyrics,' concluding 'I think it's to do with screen space' (TB2), rather than with placing related activities in close proximity to each other.

The next, and lengthiest, stage in the review was to scrutinise each activity in turn. All of the reviewers chose to do this task in Author mode as this allowed them to keep referring back to the graphical overview, which is impossible when working in LAMS as a learner. For each activity they would open the LAMS dialogue box in which the author had typed the instructions to students and had specified other options for the activity (eg whether the class was to be split into groups, which websites students were to visit, whether students could recommend other websites within the activity etc). From this information reviewers were able to interpret the purpose of activity within the context of the sequence, infer the author's rationale for using it and formulate their own response.

By the time they reached the end of the sequence, all of the reviewers had a fairly clear idea whether they could reuse it or not, and whether there were any attractive ideas or resources from individual activities that they might incorporate into their own teaching. TO1 had clearly felt inspired by the 'Medieval lyrics' sequence, but he concluded that would create his own sequence from scratch rather than adapt it because:

it's so easy to create a sequence in LAMS, and unless I was teaching that lyric there is nothing there that I could just use as it is, because it's a specific lyric and it's tied to those exam questions.

Although TB1 and TB2 had problems with 'Medieval lyrics' because its pedagogy differed substantially from theirs, they saw value in it as a training exercise:

...framing questions to train you to home in on the exam, [...] to get people to get their act together, think hard about details, [...] I think that's really useful. (TB1)

Perhaps the most interesting response came from TL1, who before her think-aloud had described using someone else's sequence as 'alien' to her own practice. However, having chosen 'Introduction to manuscript studies' on the basis of its structural similarity to dictionary studies (one of the subjects she teaches), her perspective changed somewhat:

I could easily reuse that [Resources and Forum activity], that would be 'You've got all these various dictionary entries; how would you put them together and produce an entry of your own?' [...] So yes, having said how hard it would be to reuse a sequence, that one -I could see quite easily how to reuse it.

Nevertheless, she remained concerned about the overhead involved in customising the sequence.

Tutors' experience with LAMS

Designing the sequences

Three tutors (TO1, TO2, TL1) recorded their expectations of LAMS in the design questionnaire before embarking on the task itself. Motivation, participation in group discussion and the promotion of collaborative learning were common themes, TL1 noting that she also expected LAMS to allow 'individually-directed learning without intensive use of staff time.' On the downside, TO2 was concerned about a possible loss of control on the part of teacher and the risk that students might not engage in the critical reflection that his sequence was intended to promote.

In relation to the process of designing a sequence of learning, three of the tutors laid emphasis on the way the LAMS authoring interface throws the structure of the sequence into relief.

What I found especially interesting was that it highlighted the pedagogic process very starkly [...] you could see which bits were linear and which bits were branching [...] and which bits came back, which I've always had a sort of fluid sense of [...], but there's virtually a kind of archetypical structure to the things I do, so it was getting at a deep structure. (TB1)

Although tutors felt let down by the linearity of a LAMS sequence, they nevertheless appreciated the opportunity to add new forms of activity to their existing repertoire. TO2 was particularly enthusiastic in his interview about the range of possibilities afforded by LAMS that would not have been possible in a

traditional face-to-face setting, such as access to so many Web resources, the ability for learners to share their work (in this case, their individual analyses of the poem) and learn from each other, and the ability for students to contribute anonymously to the class.

Of the five interviewees, only TO1, TB1 and TB2 had consciously designed their sequences for reuse by other tutors. TO1 had developed two sequences for teaching undergraduate students the techniques required for close reading. The first of these was specific to Isaac Rosenberg's poem 'Break of Day in the Trenches' and was re-created from an existing Web-based tutorial. The second was a content-free sequence based on the first. The key aspects of his design were:

- A simple activity structure based on a very standard way of teaching.
- Use of the word 'text' to denote the literary work being studied, rather than its title or genre (ie poem, play, novel). This was to reduce the number of modifications to be made by tutors reusing the sequence.
- Inclusion of text in square brackets to indicate where the tutor reusing the sequence could make changes if required (see Figure 4).

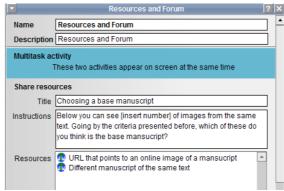


Figure 4: Tutor instructions in a generic sequence

Running the sequences with students

Reflecting in the design questionnaire on how the sequences had gone with their students, both TO1 and TL1 rated LAMS as 'quite effective' in enabling students to achieve the intended learning outcomes, although TL1 wrote that it did not suit every student's learning style. Nevertheless, it had provided an unwonted opportunity for independent reflection.

TO2 (who did not run the 'Blake' sequence with students but had spent much time observing LAMS in the secondary and HE sectors) spoke in his interview of the 'paradox' embedded in LAMS: there is 'more structure than in a normal lesson, but it's the level of structure that enables learners to learn more independently'. That is, it affords a more learner-centred or personalised approach to learning but enables the teacher to retain some influence through being 'present in the design'.

Most of the tutors seemed prepared to use LAMS again in their teaching, although TL1 commented that it was suitable only as a supplementary tool (for example, for teaching generic skills) and that designing and supporting LAMS sequences would add to her teaching load.

Undergraduate students' experience with LAMS

Data on students' experience was collected by their tutors, who then made it available to us for analysis. The Leicester students had the closest approximation to a real-life learning experience, with their LAMS session replacing a face-to-face workshop in preparation for their first-year exams. Although the Oxford students' use was embedded within their final-year course, the purpose was to gain an appreciation of the concept, processes and tools of learning design rather than to acquire new skills or domain knowledge. The Oxford Brookes students, who were in the second year of their studies, were involved in a purely

evaluative exercise. Even though participation in the sequences was voluntary, at least 50% of students in each cohort chose to do them.

Leicester

The Leicester students formed the largest of the three cohorts and their feedback yielded data which could be analysed quantitatively. Twenty-eight of the 56 students responded to a standard set of questions, largely using Likert scales, provided in the LAMS Survey activity, supplemented by two open-ended questions added by the tutor.

Responses to the Likert-scale questions suggest that roughly two-thirds of respondents felt that they had enjoyed the lesson, worked hard and learned something from it. However, only 28% had enjoyed it more than a conventional seminar and even fewer (14.8%) felt that they had learned more than they would have done in a face-to-face setting. One of this last group explained in response to an open-ended question: 'Reading whilst sat on the computers actually made me sit still and take it in!'

Positive features of the LAMS experience that emerged from the open-ended questions included direct access to websites without the need for searching (4 comments), the ability to work at one's own pace (4) and the increased levels of general participation (2). On the downside, a quarter of respondents (7) had felt restrained by the need in certain activities to wait for others to catch up or complete their share of the activity. Other less favourable reactions included a sense of working in isolation from others (4) and a preference for face-to-face interactions as being more enjoyable or productive (4).

Oxford Brookes

Five out of the ten Oxford Brookes students completed a questionnaire consisting of open-ended questions asking them about the relative strengths and weaknesses of the online environment as opposed to classroom settings. Their responses centred around a comparison of online and classroom discussion. Although asynchronous online discussions allowed participants more time to think their contributions through before posting them to the forum and might elicit more opinions, they were felt to be more laborious and to lack the spontaneity and inspirational character of classroom interactions. Another concern was the unsuitability of the topic for a LAMS sequence, one student commenting: 'I feel that the creative process needs more stimulation than a computer programme can provide.' However, the ability to keep a record of an online discussion for later review was considered an advantage.

From responses to a question asking how online and classroom modes might be blended the most effectively, LAMS' optimum role appeared to be a supplementary one, enabling the tutor to cover more ground or provide more practice. In this respect it was further suggested that a) skills should be practised in the classroom first, and b) the online component should follow on directly from the class, while the material was still fresh in students' minds.

Oxford

In accordance with their brief to look at LAMS as a learning design tool, the three Oxford students who took part in an online forum with their tutor considered LAMS' suitability to Higher Education (HE). One student felt that it was best suited to the secondary-school environment, while another felt it was 'too advanced' for GCSE work, as well as intimidating to younger learners. The third student liked 'the way it really forces you to be engaged with the material right the way through' and identified two areas where it might be used at undergraduate level: i) to enliven the close analysis of texts and manuscripts, 'which can often be very dry and unrewarding,' and ii) as a starting-point for texts: 'The opportunity to first of all form your own thoughts and then some well chosen source/biographical material to start you off could be very helpful.' However, she felt that LAMS could not replace the sort of questioning a tutor can provide.

Discussion and conclusion

The practice of reuse

The data suggest that reuse is a widespread, but low-level and largely informal practice, which is carried out largely among personal acquaintances and involves a wide range of learning materials, but not learning designs. The reusability of learning materials rather than of learning designs differentiates

English from subjects such as mathematics and the sciences, where the bulk of research into reusable online learning objects has been carried out so far. However, data from the interviews and student surveys suggests that reusable learning designs in English studies could occupy a supplementary role, providing either an asynchronous extension of an activity begun in the classroom or step-by-step tuition in the 'basic skills' of literary analysis where these have not been covered in secondary education.

The term 'reuse' is perhaps something of a misnomer, since in most cases people either adapt the materials for their own purposes or just use them as a source of inspiration and then create their own. The appropriation of someone else's materials verbatim is a minority practice and, given the strong opinions expressed about the personal and idiosyncratic nature of learning materials in English, we surmise that it is largely restricted to the reuse of course outlines and reading lists (for example, where a tutor takes over the teaching of an existing course) or examination questions and assignment topics.

Since the principle of reuse entails the willingness by someone else to share their materials, it is also unsurprising that the overwhelming majority of respondents were prepared to make at least some of their own materials available to others, both inside and outside their home institutions. However, in practice the scope for sharing anything other than annotated reading lists, images and secondary (research) texts across institutions is limited, given a) the independence of universities to create their own curricula and b) the oral medium of delivery, which means that lecture notes and presentations function primarily as *aide-mémoires* to the tutor and are therefore of limited utility to others.

The role of LAMS in English studies in Higher Education

As a tool for planning and designing sequences of learning activities, LAMS' graphical interface has compelling appeal, not only enabling tutors to visualise the flow of activities, but also stimulating reflection on their whole approach to teaching (should they recognise and choose to exploit this affordance). From the perspective of reuse, laying bare the structure of a sequence in this way enables the would-be 're-user' to see quickly whether the pedagogical approach underlying the sequence matches his/her own. However, the advantages of the 'exposed' activity structure are offset by the lack of an enforced system for specifying metadata that might enable tutors to decide whether a sequence merits investigation before they open it.

Despite the inconsistency in the methods of data collection used to elicit students' feedback on their experience with LAMS, three findings emerge in relation to the learner's perspective. First, some aspects of literary study work better than others as LAMS sequences; second, advantages in online discussions such as the freedom to reflect before contributing and the persistence of the discourse must be traded off against the loss of the spontaneity of a face-to-face interaction; and third, satisfaction with the online environment can also be a matter of simple personal preference. Moreover, the evidence also suggests that LAMS is more suitable for supporting 'convergent' learning experiences, where the tutor's aim is to bring students to a consensus, than for 'divergent' experiences such as creative writing.

Since the project was completed, all the LAMS sequences hosted on the Oxford University server have been made available for the English Subject community to explore. In addition, the project findings have been disseminated at several Subject Centre events and through its website. Feedback to date has been very positive; however, a distinct drawback has been the lack of readily accessible LAMS servers in HE institutions on which English lecturers might experiment. Although most tutors in the study commented that they would use LAMS again, none was actually doing so when questioned eight months after the initial study was completed. The English Subject Centre would therefore like to take a lead in hosting a LAMS server which would act as a 'sandpit' for the community.

Following this small-scale project it should now be possible to run a follow-on project where LAMS sequences are fully integrated into the curriculum in several institutions. This may be timely, given that some of the constraints experienced by tutors and students may now be resolved in LAMS version 2.0.

Finally, the English Subject Centre can now build on the results of this research in order to use LAMS in other areas of its own teaching, dissemination and project work. One example is in its annual pre-session course for new lecturers. This short course is run on the Subject Centre's Moodle VLE and contains a number of exercises and activities which the participant must complete prior to attending a three-day

training event. Incorporation of a LAMS sequence as an activity in the VLE would create interest and help to raise the profile of LAMS generally. It would capitalise on the strength of LAMS to 'capture pedagogy' by letting new practitioners investigate sequences in Author mode. It is also clear that, when disseminating project outcomes, hands-on workshops can be more effective than show-and-tell events, as participants in the latter are often unable to conceptualise what learning design really is from a didactic presentation alone.

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The sequences which were developed during the project and are listed in Table 1 can be viewed on the LAMS server at Oxford: http://stickleback.oucs.ox.ac.uk:8080/lams/login.jsp. A trial username and password are available from: brett.lucas@rhul.ac.uk

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