BOOK REVIEW


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ON THE ROAD OF IMPROVEMENT: A USEFUL TOOLBOX FOR UNIVERSITY EDUCATORS TO RE/DESIGN BLENDED AND ONLINE COURSES

Jan Nedermeijer’s book, published by Brill, Boston, in 2023, sets out on the quest to implement educational research findings into practice. He is an experienced researcher and education consultant worldwide. The idea of the book stems from three core aspects: first, teachers should be designers of educational tools, second, it is not enough to make research in education, findings should be put into practical usage, and last, the advancement of literature in this field may introduce newer courses. The book contains four parts, twenty-two chapters. After the brief introduction, the first part provides an overview of course design and development, explaining the occurring problems and defines the basic terminology. In the introductory part Nedermeijer addresses the main audience, senior educational experts, senior university teachers, and early career university educators ‘these teachers will be willing and able to redesign their education optimally’ (p. 1). The main parts of the book are also in this section; therefore, the reader can easily be acquainted with the full scope of the book. The first part offers a generic overview of basic definitions of the field, blueprints, route maps and everything else even for laypersons. The following section focuses on practical examples of blended and online learning. The author provides thoughtful experiences on how to redesign an online course. The third part contains the toolbox of pedagogical design from which seniors, early career educators and those who are interested in this topic. The last part contains discussions of technical design and course development. Readers can also check the website which is appealing in as much as the author does not only write a book on the topic but also provides his own example, evidence for the theory.

The first chapter discusses Evidence-Based Process Course Design in higher education focusing on the challenges of blending face-to-face education with technology. It aims to assist university teachers in redesigning their courses, whether due to external requirements or personal goals for improvement. The emphasize is on the importance of a well-balanced combination of face-to-face teaching (F2F), IT tools, and self-study activities. If these three activities

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are present, the studying process will be greatly enhanced: 'the basic idea is that the teacher designer uses the powerful features of the three areas of teaching and learning activities’ (p. 7). The chapter similarly outlines three crucial ingredients for successful course design: aligning design tasks with teacher experiences, utilizing evidence from educational research, and applying design principles in the course development process. The focus is on the need for teachers to follow a systematic course design and development process to enhance quality and create an optimal learning environment.

The following chapter is a particularly interesting reading guide. It suggests that the author yearns to promote the book as a tool for every reader in harmony with their needs. Users can easily identify their chapter and immediately get necessary answers. It also offers practical advice for teachers in HE to design blended and online learning courses addressing probable scenarios.

At the beginning of his book, Nedermeijer addresses those who would like to (re)design their courses. Then he puts emphasis on the example of blended learning. He shifts the attention afterwards to the design toolbox, and then, the last part is about sources and features for the basic DD (Design and Development) process. The author applies distinction among the types of readers, as the book addresses four types, nevertheless, it is suitable basically to anyone who would like to dive into course design. There are four main categories of readers: the first are those who want a more detailed explanation and theoretical background, and then they can decide whether to use IT options and blended and/or online learning or not. Another subcategory of readers is those designers who would like to include new ideas into an existing course. For them, the author recommends Chapter 8 immediately, the 6-step DD process. The guide then offers solutions for the next readers in line. The focal point here is on advancement of their course on a bigger scale, for example active learning assignments. For them, Chapter 9 is the suitable part. The last types of users should move immediately to the toolbox part for the 6-step basic, the 9-step advanced or the Vision in Product Design sections.

The chapter’s second part is for those educators who have specific problems with course design. This section lends a hand to four different groups, too. Chapter 5 and 16 aim at having a better understanding of Modern Higher Education (MHE), and then to adopt some modern pedagogical ideas. The next is for teachers who are interested in available software and IT solutions. Learning psychology background and tips for organizing MHE advice can be found in Chapter 13. Finally, one may get some ideas about an evidence-based approach in Chapters 3, 5, 7 and 16. As a summary, Nedermeijer points out the kind of guide-book style of his work: ‘You can use the book for different purposes that I have experienced in my advice work. You can read parts of the book to obtain insights into blended and online learning concepts’ (p. 16).

What is the difference between evidence-based and evidence-informed? Does it really matter? The author raises such questions in the next chapter as difference between these two sometimes is easy to be misunderstood. In Chapter 3, titled “Evidence-Based or Evidence-Informed Course Design?”, the text underscores the significance of integrating evidence from educational research into course design and development process. This is important for teachers who often hesitate to adopt evidence-based teaching methods. The chapter discusses how research evidence and teachers’ expertise should be combined in design situations to create clear and practical pedagogical concepts for course and curriculum projects.

Chapter 3 covers such main themes of Evidence-Informed or Evidence-Based Learning, Basic Features of Evidence-Based Medicine Compared with Course Design, and the importance of being critical in the design process. By focusing on educational research evidence, the author
aims to infuse the course design process with an evidence-based approach. Comparisons are drawn between evidence-based education and evidence-based medicine, highlighting the complexities of learning environments, and the challenges of controlling various interacting variables. He also encourages the use of evidence-based course design, despite the inherent challenges in delivering the same level of evidence as in clinical practice. It stresses the importance of utilizing available evidence to enhance course design and move beyond relying solely on opinions and intuition. Teacher should be “conscious and “clear” (p. 20). The narrative emphasizes the critical evaluation of evidence to improve learning outcomes and addresses the need for evidence-based practices to elevate the quality of higher education effectively.

The fourth chapter offers a variety of topics, for example why we should use IT in higher education or what blended learning is. After these basic concepts Nedermeijer digs deep into practicalities, answering real questions and exhibiting the peculiarities of (MOOC) and Small Online Private Courses (SPOCS). The writing then evaluates studies regarding the use of information technology in higher education, showing that IT-based study activities are comparable to traditional study activities. Specific added values of both forms of education are highlighted, such as the benefits of face-to-face lectures where teachers can engage and assess student understanding directly. The chapter covers topics including the rationale for considering IT in higher education, definitions of blended learning and online courses, as well as more complex formats like hybrid education. Regarding the consideration of using IT in higher education, it is noted that IT pedagogical options can enhance the quality of blended learning in online courses. For instance, IT options can facilitate a deeper understanding of complex topics through multimedia-rich assignments. Teachers can provide standard feedback through virtual learning environments (VLEs) and offer necessary support. Students can be encouraged to work independently, allowing for more control and responsibility over their study activities, especially in scenarios like the COVID-19 pandemic, illnesses, or adverse weather conditions.

In Chapter 5 readers can find syllabi on possible pedagogical options for using IT in higher education (Figure 3), several forms with which the designer can analyze and evaluate their courses, and to receive ideas to upgrade their own works. The author shares questionnaires/guides with the readers, these can be instantly applied, thus this chapter can be a great help for the educators. Moreover, the chapter does not contain only these attachments, it is also an overview of evidence-based pedagogical options for implementing technology in education. The chapter discusses various researched and proven methods in educational settings, emphasizing the importance of evidence-based approaches, moreover, it highlights the use of IT tools in education. These explanations and strategies support self-study and classroom learning, preparing students for the professional fields, facilitations communication between students and teachers, applying tests and feedback, and evaluating courses. The readers can also learn about the emphasis on active learning, the importance of preparing students for real-world scenarios, fostering communication, and using testing as a tool for learning assessment.

Chapter 6 can be the first milestone of the book, as it presents the Basic DD process, the 6-step, and 9-step versions. This part is useful for educators and would-be course designers, as it contains all the necessary information about course design. Nedermeijer discusses the importance of a workable evidence-based design process for course development. It combines technical design approaches from various sources and emphasizes the need for unique design activities based on the complexity of the design situation. It outlines six main design activities and highlights that course design is an iterative process involving divergent and convergent
thinking, where teacher designers are considered as “craftspeople” (p. 60) who master instructional course design skills.

In the second part, the author provides an example of the blended learning course and a case study. There is an overview of evidence-based pedagogical models for blended and online education. It discusses various pedagogical options researched for effectiveness, such as stimulating self-study for deep learning and the flipped classroom model. The pedagogical model part deals with Virtual Learning Environment (VLE) in connection with the self-study phase, face-to-face (F2F) evaluation, and other IT options. It also points out the optimal blends of the F2F and online learning in order to enhance the outcomes, then highlights the importance of providing feedback, organizing group activities, and adapting to different educational formats, including fully online courses. Readers become familiar with the “Flipped Classroom Model” (p. 107), and another one where a step-by-step guide provides lectures and tutorials for educators too. One can find several tips and advice about the learning processes, route maps, even general suggestions for student-to-student (S2S) and student-to-teacher (S2T) communication. The chapter concludes with recommendations on course design, assessment strategies, and fostering collaboration between students and teachers in digital learning environments.

The following section, chapter 8, is for those who would like to redesign their existing material(s) into a blended learning structure. It aims to give teachers insight into using Moodle and implementing blended learning. Participants redesign their courses using IT options, focusing on effective, efficient, and valued learning. They work through steps like formulating ideas for IT use, preparing a route map, and creating a blueprint. The materials combine face-to-face education, self-study, and group work. It emphasizes active learning and practical application of blended learning concepts. All these parts and chapters can be used as a whole, for a total redesign, or each step individually for those who would like to improve only specific parts in their lessons.

Chapter 9 presents a Course Program for the 9-Stage DD Process aimed at supporting teacher designers in implementing new pedagogical approaches in their courses. Design Situation 2 involves significant changes in pedagogical approaches, such as blended learning or active learning, requiring tasks like collecting information, creating route maps, designing new activities, and evaluating products. The workshop activities focus on practicing the 9-stage DD process, with materials available through Moodle. Individual teacher designers can follow the workshop program to familiarize themselves with the process and support other teachers. The aim is to create effective, well-liked, and feasible education programs that align with learning objectives and engage students effectively.

In the following section, the work offers numerous examples for readers. This chapter describes the Design and Development (DD) process to prepare for the workshop “Redesign Your Course in a Blended Learning Course.” An example case study provides insight into the DD process for more complex design situations focusing on activities such as preparing and discussing the design briefly, and program’s route map. The chapter also outlines the author’s activities as a Senior Expert in the Netherlands and as a Senior Expert Contact organizing training programs on blended learning with Moodle in various developing countries.

Part 3 of the book depicts the course design toolbox for the reader via six chapters. Chapter 11 provides insights into the tools used by the designers during the DD process for course development. It outlines various educational products prepared during the process, such as learning objectives, teaching activities, assignments, tests, route maps, blueprints, modules,
and study guides. The chapter summarizes where to find these tools in the book and highlights additional valuable tools. It also mentions external resources like books and websites with evidence-based results that can enhance the design process. It aims to equip teacher designers with effective tools to generate and evaluate design ideas for course development in HE.

Thus, the following chapter sheds light on different curriculum models in HE, such as Case Studies, Research- and Problem-Based Education, Project Education, Traditional Education Combined with New Teaching Methods, Task-Oriented Education, and Modules. They range from authentic case studies to research-based curricula and problem-based education. Each one emphasizes different teaching and learning approaches, such as task-oriented learning, practical projects, and structured modules. The chapter provides insights on how to incorporate these devices into their courses, encouraging reflection on selecting and implementing the most suitable instrument to meet specific educational needs. This part paves the way to one of the most influential theories of nowadays, the Hattie learning method, then introduces the necessary tools for its possible manifestations.

Chapter 13 of the text discusses “The Model of Hattie and Donoghue about Learning in Higher Education.”, and it focuses on learning strategies. Chapter 14 delves into “Instructional Planning and Building Principles to Be Realized in Your Course” (p. 208). It provides principles for designing effective courses, such as connecting with students’ prior knowledge and providing information on learning objectives. The Model of Learning part enhances the readers’ abilities to widen their theoretical knowledge in the field of pedagogy, based on the widely accepted and acclaimed works of J. A. C. Hattie, professor at the University of Melbourne. Through this part, readers can get accustomed to a rather modern approach to learning, while the succeeding chapter offers principles to the more practical side of designing, providing legs up to those who fancy the subject.

Chapters 15 and 16 encapsulate common mistakes and design principles. First, it provides valuable insights for teacher designers on evaluation processes, it stresses importance of not rushing the final design step and encourages critical reflection of the effectives of the design and clarity of assignments. The author covers topics such as imperatives for learners, the need for overviews, and practicalities. Then he focuses on instructional planning and building principles for courses. This section underlines the importance of tests which ensure that students perform at the intended level. It also covers formative and summative testing principles, quality, and standards of tests, and shares assessment methods too. It is a helpful guide to anyone who would like to design an effective way to measure the knowledge of their students.

The last part elaborates on the accountable sources of features used in the DD process. In chapter 18, the author focuses on design activities in course design and development across different domains. The chapter discusses various topics such as Technical Design Features and Examples of Course Design and Development Models The chapter highlights the importance of incorporating various design features from technical design, design thinking, problem-solving, and creativity into course development models to enhance the overall design process.

Chapters 19 and 20 talk about design thinking and problem solving. It discusses different versions of the design thinking process, including a seven-stage model and the five principles of design thinking. The chapter emphasizes the need for creativity and innovation in course design and development, stressing the significance of empathy, ideation, prototyping, and testing in problem-solving. As Nedermeijer argues: “A problem exists when the teacher designers want to achieve something but cannot realise it” (p. 284). The chapter in line delves into the oft
occurring errors in course development models, thus revealing the iterative nature of problem solving.

The concluding chapter of the text dissects the obstacles around the implementation of DD processes. He describes plausible methods and how faculty values and concerns can hinder the adoption of evidence-based teaching methods. Furthermore, there are suggestions to support and motivate faculties to apply research evidence effectively in their teaching practices. The importance of understanding is also accentuated the barriers and facilitators of meaningful innovation in education.

This book, just as it states in the introduction, is a guide. It can be used as a whole; however, it is also possible for the educators to use and utilize only parts of it. An undisputedly helpful guide for all those course designers who would like to improve their existing works, to create new courses or to facilitate and enhance their teaching methods. On the other hand, it is difficult to decide whether the text is for only the narrow sector of educators or the laymen too, mostly because it uses a wide range of technical terms that are mainly accessible for the designated audience.