# JISC

**Phoebe** beta

Pedagogic planner

## JISC Design for Learning Programme

# EVALUATION OF THE PHOEBE PEDAGOGY PLANNER PROJECT: INTERIM EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

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**Note:** A comprehensive evaluation report will be available shortly as a separate document.

## 1. Research Questions

The evaluation of the Phoebe Pedagogy Planner project took place between January 2007 and April 2008 and covered both Phase 1 and Phase 2. A principal goal of the project was to prove the concept of, and develop the specification for, a pedagogical planner that would be useful in a variety of contexts, rather than strive to produce a fully functioning practitioner-ready system. The evaluation reflected this goal by seeking to make clear, and elicit participants' response to, the vision underlying the design of the tool as well as the tool itself.

The project set out to address six key questions:

1. Is Phoebe a tool that practitioners in post-compulsory education find usable, helpful and relevant to their needs, whether they are
   a) beginning or experienced teachers looking to use technology in their teaching for the first time, or
   b) are familiar with e-learning but are looking for new ideas re technology and pedagogy?
   Specifically, does it encourage teachers to think about their practice in a structured way?

2. Can one tool address all sectors of post-16 education, or are separate tools required for each?

3. Is Phoebe suitable as a tool for teacher education and/or for everyday practice?

4. What additional features and functionality are required to turn Phoebe from a proof-of-concept prototype into a tool for general use?

5. What is needed to support the community dimension of using learning design and make it possible to sustain learning designs as community artefacts?

6. What other potential issues of sustainability exist, and how might these be resolved?

## 2. Method

The Phoebe evaluation targeted four groups of **participants**:

a) The "broad church" of teaching staff: both those who were already familiar with the use of technology in their practice and those who were new to technology.
b) Staff responsible for the dissemination of technology in pedagogic practice: i.e. staff developers (CPD), teacher trainers (ITT), IT support officers learning technologists.
c) Teachers and students undergoing CPD and ITT respectively.
d) Policy-makers and others from strategic agencies (e.g. HEA, , NIACE, ALT).

**Participants** were recruited from practitioners involved in the preceding Learning Design Tools project and the Design for Learning programme (some of whom hosted evaluation events with their colleagues or students) and volunteers who discovered Phoebe serendipitously. Six of the nine "practitioner-informants," who contributed to the design of Phase 1 also participated in the evaluation of the first prototype.

Much of the evaluation data were collected in association with events specifically organised for the purposes of the project. The **schedule** of these events and their associated **data collection instruments** are summarised in Table 1.

*Table 1.Phoebe evaluation programme*

| Date | Event | Factor(s) evaluated | Method(s) [+ no. of respondents] |
|------|-------|---------------------|----------------------------------|
| **Phase 1** | | | |
| 23/01/07 | Design review | Acceptability of tool to wider D4L community | Demonstration of tool; feedback via paper-based survey [9] |
| Feb '07 | Meetings with individual practitioner informants | Usability and usefulness of prototype tool | Walkthroughs by participants; feedback via interviews [6] |
| 22/02/07 | Workshop at University of Greenwich | Embedding | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via discussion [3] |
| **Phase 2** | | | |
| 31/10/07 | Trainee teachers' workshop (HE), University of Greenwich | Usability; embedding in ITT; suitability for novice teachers | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via online survey [15] |
| 14/01/08 | Experienced practitioners' workshop for staff in FE, HE, ACL, WBL | Sustainability; suitability for experienced practitioners; customisation; support for collaborative planning | Pre-workshop online survey to elicit current practice [12] |
| | | | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via discussion and online survey [12] |
| 29/01/08 | "E-learning intensive" at the University of Brighton led by Oxford Brookes University | Sustainability; suitability for experienced practitioners; customisation; support for collaborative planning | Pre-workshop online survey to elicit current practice [11] |
| | | | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via discussion [no figures] |
| 06/02/08 | Trainee teachers' workshop (FE), Swansea College | Usability; embedding in ITT; suitability for novice teachers | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via online survey [20] |
| Feb-Mar '08 | Online evaluation by volunteer users | Usability; usefulness | Pre-evaluation online survey to elicit current practice [20] |
| | | | Hands-on experience; feedback via online survey [11] |
| 04/03/08 | Strategic review meeting with representatives from HEA, Becta, ACLearn: joint event with the London Pedagogy Planner project; organised by JISC | Viability of the concept of a pedagogy planning tools; suitability across sectors and domains | Pre- and post-meeting online surveys to elicit general perspectives [22, 9] |
| | | | Demonstration and hands-on experience; feedback via paper-based survey [30] |

# 3. Summary of findings in relation to the research questions

### 3.1 Is Phoebe usable, helpful and relevant to practitioners' needs?
The Phase 2 version of the tool addressed most of the usability shortcomings revealed in Phase 1, and was generally judged by experienced practitioners to be easy to learn to use, and to use for creating an actual pedagogic plan. Trainee teachers were more likely to have a higher initial learning curve, although most were able to get to grips with the tool in the short time which they were given to work with it.

For both groups, though, the reference part of the tool was probably more helpful than the planning functionality itself. In terms of individual preferences, Phoebe would suit teachers who already adopt a systematic approach, but not those who prefer to map out ideas graphically. Also, as some evaluators noted, use of the tool alone is not sufficient to bring about good practice, and if it maps too easily to teachers' existing practice without encouraging them to move forward from this "comfort zone," then the desired innovation will not happen.

At the institutional level, the tool needs to map to the kinds of practice that are supported and promoted generally. Generally, the structured approach appears to predominate at the course and module level, with more freedom allowed at the session level. Nevertheless, the majority of practitioners who completed the "preliminary" online surveys normally tended towards a structured approach in planning individual learning sessions, and some commented positively on the degree to which Phoebe encouraged them to think about the task in a structured way. However, structure can be seen as a weakness as well as a strength, particularly where it restricts the possibilities for creative thinking.

### 3.2 Can one tool address all sectors of post-16 education?
Phoebe was well received by the FE community in particular, although both the complexity of the plans and the nature of the content were criticised by some for tending to support the HE sector more. However, planning is currently not considered to be a cross-sector activity: indeed, a "not invented here" culture can militate against the sharing of learning designs and resources even across institutions within the same sector. However, customisable templates and content that will allow Phoebe to be used in different institutions in different sectors would open up the possibility of cross-sector fertilisation in principle, even if practice lags behind.

### 3.3 Is Phoebe suitable as a tool for teacher education and/or for everyday practice?
Phoebe was perceived to have value both in formal ITT and CPD programmes and in "informal" professional learning, where teachers are motivated to try out alternative methods or generally in search of inspiration. A particularly strong point of the tool in this respect is the priority that it gives to pedagogy over technology. It was also considered useful to individual teachers working in isolation (e.g. in the ACL sector), particularly if preceded by an introductory face-to-face workshop at their "home" institution.

A number of experienced teachers felt that they would use Phoebe primarily for reference and reflection. Those who thought they would use it to plan would probably do so in conjunction with existing tools. In particular, it is important to acknowledge the continued importance – even superiority – of pencil-and-paper (i.e. handwritten) techniques in supporting particular kinds of cognitive process (notably brainstorming and idea formation) and in providing a greater expanse of physical space for mapping out ideas.

### 3.4 What additional features and functionality for general use?
The development map produced alongside the project completion report lists desirable enhancements derived from the evaluations, as well as internal project discussions, meetings with JISC representatives and meetings with related projects. This document is available online at http://phoebe-project.conted.ox.ac.uk/cgi-bin/trac.cgi/wiki/ProjectOutputs.

### 3.5 What is needed to support the community dimension of learning design?

The evaluation data have suggested that Phoebe will function best as a community artefact, both in terms of propagating and supporting its use within individual institutions and in terms of providing customised terminology, learning design templates, guidance (e.g. regarding teaching approaches), and examples relevant to users' contexts (be those institution-based or subject-based).

However, success in this respect will depend upon the general acceptance of the tool by practitioners, and upon support within the tool for collaborative planning as a blended process, with the emergent plan both shaping, and being shaped by, communications among practitioners that take place both online and in face-to-face settings. IPR of shared designs is another key concern. Barriers that lie outside the control of the project team are buy-in to the concept of design for learning at the institutional level, cultural resistance to sharing learning designs and resources, and allocation of responsibility for day-to-day support for users. There is also the risk that a customised version of Phoebe could be "locked down" by an individual institution, thereby impeding individual creativity and innovation.

### 3.6 What other potential issues of sustainability exist, and how might these be resolved?

Discussions about the sustainability of Phoebe have uncovered the following major concerns:

- Maintaining the currency of the reference and guidance system.
- Preserving the customised parts of Phoebe when the "core" product is updated.
- Ongoing financial support for developing, maintaining and hosting the tool. Users are hesitant to invest resources in a tool for which such support might be withdrawn at short notice.

Proposed "social" models of sustainability include a low-cost subscription service and a Wikipedia-style approach to maintaining the reference and guidance system, in which moderation by the project team would be essential to preserve its integrity and consistency. A proposed "technical" model is a modular one, such that the core product could be updated without impinging on the customised sections.

Above all, the evaluations have shown that the relationship between Phoebe and its communities of users will be central to its sustainability. This relationship is symbiotic in that Phoebe must genuinely be useful to a community in terms of functionality, guidance, output and interoperability with neighbouring pedagogic and administrative systems (hence the importance of customisable, if not locally hosted, versions) if that community is to continue to use it, yet Phoebe will be dependent on those communities to maintain the currency of, and expand the content of, its reference and guidance system.


## 4. Provisional conclusion

The usefulness of pedagogy planning as a general concept is indisputable, whatever the terminology used to articulate it, and whether or not it is explicitly located within the overall practice of design for learning. Also recognised is the value of digital technologies in supporting the process of pedagogy planning, both to initiate trainee teachers into good design-for-learning practice and to provide experienced staff with inspiration for alternative approaches, tools and methods. Dedicated pedagogy planning tools can provide enhanced support through a) guidance, advice and examples and b) potentially, interoperability with other pedagogic and administrative systems. Phoebe has demonstrated the first, while the second still lies in the future. However, substantial challenges remain: principally, the question of the forms of representation which pedagogic plans may take, both intermediate and "final;" the relationship among planning, authoring and instantiation; how communities of users are to be instigated, nurtured and sustained; and, more fundamentally, the nature of the abstract cognitive model of planning that these tools are intended to support.