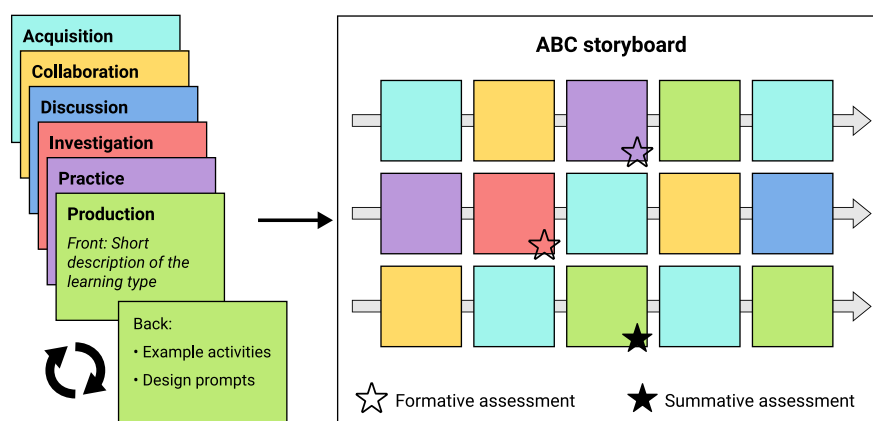


Supporting rapid learning design using ABC learning design

ABC learning design¹ is a rapid, hands-on approach used to storyboard and design blended learning experiences. It is centred around six 'learning types', with educators using six associated 'learning cards' to structure the design process and identify suitable learning activities, often in a team-based workshop setting². While widely adopted and well documented in higher education, its principles are flexible and have been adapted to various other educational scenarios.



ABC learning design cards and their application to an ABC storyboard plan
Image based on the process described by Young, C. & Perovic, N. (2016)¹

The six learning types

Central to the ABC learning design approach are six learning types. These learning types provide a straightforward pedagogical lens through which educators can select and sequence learning activities to create high-quality learning experiences. The six learning types align with the 'Conversational Framework' proposed by Laurillard³, which aims to represent different kinds of roles played by teachers and learners as simply as possible and reflects principles drawn from established theories of learning.

Learning activities broadly fit into one of the following learning types:

- Acquisition: Learning by reading, listening, or watching
- Collaboration: Learning by working with others towards a common goal, involving co-creation and shared outputs
- Discussion: Learning through dialogue, sharing ideas, and responding to others
- Investigation: Learning by exploring, comparing, and evaluating new information or experiences
- Practice: Learning by applying knowledge and skills, receiving feedback, and refining understanding
- Production: Learning by expressing understanding or creating something to demonstrate knowledge and skills

It is important to distinguish these six learning types from the widely discredited⁴ concept of 'learning styles'. Rather than describing fixed characteristics or preferences of learners, these learning types refer to different kinds of learning activities and pedagogical approaches that can be designed into a course.

Summary

ABC is a rapid approach to designing learning experiences, centred around six learning types and a design process.

Learning types:

- Acquisition: Reading, listening, or watching
- Collaboration: Working together to build knowledge and skills
- Discussion: Sharing ideas, questioning, and responding
- Investigation: Exploring, comparing, and evaluating new information
- Practice: Applying knowledge and receiving and responding to feedback
- Production: Applying understanding to express or make something

Learning cards:

- Postcard-sized cards provide summaries of learning types and activities
- The front shows the learning type and a brief description
- The back includes examples of activities aligned to the learning type
- The cards could include activities for a range of contexts
- UDL prompts may help maintain a focus on accessible learning

ABC process

- Summarise the learning aims or purpose
- Profile the intended learning types
- Storyboard the learning journey
- Review and select activities
- Identify assessment opportunities
- Profile the actual learning types
- Discuss and finalise the plan

ABC learning cards

A key practical component of the ABC learning design process is the use of a set of 'learning cards', each dedicated to one of the six learning types. These cards are typically postcard-sized and colour-coded, and display the name and a brief description of the learning type on the front and examples of associated digital or in-person learning activities on the back. During an ABC workshop, these cards become dynamic tools.

The physical manipulation and visual representation offered by the cards make the design process highly engaging, prompting rich discussion and team-based decision-making¹.

The ABC learning design process in action (the 90-minute workshop)

The ABC learning design method is often experienced as a dynamic 90-minute workshop. While typically facilitated ([extensive resources are available](#)), its principles can be valuable for any educators engaging in collaborative curriculum planning, such as departmental teams.

The process involves participants completing several key actions²:

1. Defining a vision for their course: Articulating the core purpose, learning outcomes, or unique features in a few sentences
2. Profiling the intended learning types: Outlining an initial vision for the intended mix and emphasis of the six learning types across their course
3. Storyboarding the learning journey: Arranging learning cards and mapping out a proposed sequence of learning types, forming a learner's journey through the course

4. Selecting specific activities: Discussing and selecting potential activities for each stage of the storyboard, referring to example activities on the reverse of the learning cards
5. Identifying assessment opportunities: Reviewing the storyboard to identify formative and summative assessment opportunities
7. Profiling the actual learning types: Reflecting on how the learning types in their completed storyboard compare with their intended profile
8. Discussing and finalising the plan: Discussing and sharing the plan so that everyone leaves with a shared high-level design, ready for further development

The process has been used successfully in higher education settings to help rapidly develop new courses or modules as well as adapt existing curriculum materials for new contexts or delivery modes. Once adapted to their contexts, educators may find ABC a valuable tool for learning design.

Combining ABC with universal design for learning

Accessibility is an important consideration when designing learning experiences, and the [universal design for learning](#) (UDL) framework exists to support educators to reduce barriers for learners. UDL helps educators to create learning environments that are accessible and effective for all learners by providing multiple means of engagement, representation, and action and expression.

Gormley, et al.⁵ described an initiative to integrate UDL with ABC learning design. They developed adapted ABC learning cards where the reverse side included specific UDL prompts, in addition to the usual example activities. For example:

- An Acquisition card could include the prompt "Will materials be available in a variety of formats (text, audio, and visual)? Will videos be captioned and transcribed?"
- A Production card could include the prompt "Are there multiple ways for learners to demonstrate their understanding? Can they choose between writing, presenting, or creating?"

By including these UDL considerations directly on the ABC cards, the design team ensured that accessibility and inclusivity were central to learning design conversations.

Addressing different technology options

In 2020 (during the COVID-19 pandemic), the Computing at School (CAS) Research Working Group worked with classroom teachers to apply ABC learning design in their own school-based contexts. Following some training, teachers analysed their existing classroom activities and then developed a range of suitable alternatives for remote learning, categorising them into low-tech, mid-tech, and high-tech options. These options were added to their own sets of ABC learning cards and used to support them to adapt lessons for remote teaching. Read about the project and view example cards on the [CAS website](#).



This resource by Raspberry Pi Foundation is licensed under CC BY-NC-SA 4.0. To view a copy of this license, visit <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-sa/4.0/>

References

- ¹ Young, C. and Perović, N. (2016). Rapid and Creative Course Design: As Easy as ABC? the-cc.io/qr25_3
- ² ABC Learning Design: Sprint design your courses and programs in just 90 minutes. the-cc.io/qr25_4
- ³ Laurillard, D. (2012). Teaching as a Design Science: Building Pedagogical Patterns for Learning and Technology. the-cc.io/qr25_5
- ⁴ Pashler, H. et al. (2008). Learning Styles: Concepts and Evidence. the-cc.io/qr25_6
- ⁵ Gormley, C. et al. (2022). Adaptable ABC: Learning Design for All. the-cc.io/qr25_7