The evolution of learning design: shaping the university from the third space

Introduction

Learning design, in its various guises, is a long-standing occupation in higher education. Over time it has simultaneously evolved and not evolved (Harland & Staniforth, 2008; Hokanson, Miller & Hooper, 2008) and we now arrive at a time where calls for change in the university sector grow increasingly louder but we aren't, as a profession, sure how to answer - "designers have not necessarily realised their agency in the development of a knowledge economy". (Campbell, Schwier & Kenny, 2005: 8).

This paper gives an overview of the learning design landscape in higher education, and discusses some of the issues feeding into the lack of agency and impact we experience. It then looks at some of the calls to change and potential futures for the profession from the literature, and draws in new lines of thinking to propose an alternative potential future for learning design in which we reclaim the humanness of our role and begin to shape the university through social, cultural and personal transformation.

A note on nomenclature

The term 'learning design' is used consistently throughout this paper to describe a particular genre of work, as this is a common title currently in use in Australian higher education and the one now used by my own institution. In the literature, academic development and instructional design are the dominant terms, and 'in the North American context, faculty development or instructional development is used; educational development is preferred in the UK' (Fyffe, 2018: 258). All of these titles are either used interchangeably and are taken to have identical meaning, or are understood to differ but represent bodies of work that significantly overlap in both the duties of the role and the experience domains of those employed in these roles.

What are we doing? The learning designer as articulated

Defining the role and purpose of a learning designer is somewhat like trying to nail jelly to the wall, but there seems to be a consensus as to the general nature of the work. Some definitions, duties and foci drawn from the literature:

- 'Establish effective learning environments' (Sims & Koszalka, 2007: 570)
- 'assist academics to improve their teaching' (Fraser, 1999: 90)
- 'Works closely with a subject matter expert (SME) or university teacher...to develop a classroom-based or technology based learning environment' (Seeto & Harrington, 2006: 741)

- 'The improvement, support and development of teaching, learning, assessment and curriculum...research into higher education...promotion of the scholarship of teaching and learning' (Bath & Smith, 2004: 14)
- 'Providing expert guidance relating to teaching and learning principles and outcomes' (Debowski, 2014: 50)
- 'A primary focus on how teaching and learning occurs' (Kinash & Wood, 2013: 178)
- 'Primarily supports academic staff as they learn about their teaching and other aspects of academic work' (Harland & Staniforth, 2008: 671)
- 'The historical concern for student learning is a strong driver' (Fyffe, 2018: 355)

While it is historically understood that people arrive into careers in learning design with pedagogical expertise having come from teaching careers (Fraser, 1999), that is no longer the case and many non-teaching career paths may lead to learning design, such as IT (Harland & Staniforth, 2008), graphic and multimedia design, administration or research. This has led to a diversifying of expertise domains beyond the pedagogical. The move into online learning has further muddied the waters regarding what is pedagogical and what is technical.

Even amongst those who have pedagogical backgrounds, there is wide variation in approaches. For instance, Land (2001: 6) outlines twelve different orientations to practice contributing to different work models. Further complicating the matter is institutional variance in the direction, description and naming of these roles, with further variance between the departments of individual institutions.

However, from the descriptions above, it seems uncontentious to suggest that most learning designers contribute in some way to the development of teaching and learning in higher education. Whether or not this development constitutes advancement, evolution or transformation is another matter, discussed below.

What are we actually doing? The learning designer as experienced

Despite a general consensus on the nature of learning design work, the actual experience of the role in practice is somewhat different and varies considerably across time and space. The waters of role, identity, structure and impact are considerably muddied by a number of issues. The organisation and culture of learning design has not changed significantly in 30 years (Harland & Staniforth, 2008: 669), and these issues have emerged as constants across the literature in this time.

Fragmentation & identity

There is no standard path to becoming a learning designer (Fraser, 1999). This diversity in background and expertise domains has led to increasing difficulty in defining the work of learning designers, and caused some tension within the profession (Harland and Staniforth,

2008). Blurring between the roles of learning designer and user (Sims & Koszalka, 2007: 571) further contributes to the fragmentation of the role.

Harland & Staniforth (2008) talk about a 'family of strangers' - a group in which people feel they are part of a community of some type, but there is no common identity, value set or work articulation for those within the community. Kinash and Wood (2013: 180) concur that 'Identity is not a fixed, unified constant...but a uniquely applied and enacted construct'. This leads to a situation of uniting, separately, from our own homes[1], diluting our own impact through a lack of cohesive identity and purpose.

Institutional structures

Institutional power and governance structures play strongly into the impact of learning design work. Learning design as an organisational entity lacks definition, leading to marginalisation and 'master and servant' relationships (Kinash & Wood, 2013). There is often a lack of power to translate knowledge into widespread or sustained practice, unless there is strong leadership support and alignment (Debowski, 2014: 54).

There is a lack of consistency both within and across institutions regarding the recruitment and deployment of learning design, and variance in the direction of the work. This leads to a lack of shared values, goals and experiences (Harland & Staniforth, 2008).

In project-based partnership models, the completion and implementation of the learning environment often means the cessation of the learning designer's involvement, leading to wisdom being lost when the learning designer's work is allocated elsewhere (Seeto & Harrington, 2016: 741). There is also a tendency to employ learning design at the micro (assessment, unit or course) level, rather than at an overarching program or strategic level (ibid: 742).

Gossman talks about our work using the football metaphor of 'assists'[2] and the measure of our worth based on this - 'the ripples outworks of our role and what assists we provide is a key impact' (2019). There is a fundamental level of remove built into institutional structures, such that we can only claim diffuse impact or impact subordinate to others.

Misunderstanding of role, Perception of value

The work of learning designers exists in an awkward space, where there is an institutional privileging of research over teaching (Zipin & Brennan, 2019). When research is perceived as a prime directive, it is difficult to answer the question 'why would I want to improve my teaching?' and thus 'why would I need a learning designer?'.

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[1] https://louderminds.com/introverts-unite-separately/
[2] https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Assist_(football)

Even when our value is understood and we are engaged, we are sometimes judged on the work of others (Gossman, 2019) regardless of quality, and are often measured by external indicators of value-add rather than our own defined value indicators (Kinash & Wood, 2013).

There is also a compulsion to avoid offending academic collaborators - 'you always have to be treading on eggshells when you are working with academic staff' (Fraser, 2001: 56). The protection of the ego and identity of others means we often temper or dilute our articulation of role, leading to an understanding of our role as only the tasks we have deemed palatable ('it's presumptuous to think of yourself as teaching them' - ibid: 58), or only the value that is deemed an inoffensive supplement to academic work.

These factors, combined with the lack of role definition articulated above means learning designers are often 'watching their backs and wondering how others perceive them' (Bath & Smith, 2004: 10). Misunderstanding, marginalisation and the muddying of value contribute to a profession whose purpose in the university is not well understood, sometimes even by ourselves.

The third space

Whitchurch (2008) first defined the 'third space' - those in higher education whose roles fall in the gap between the traditional academic and professional dichotomy. Learning designers are perhaps one of the most recognised as third space professionals, and regardless of contract we find ourselves undertaking academic work that does not fit traditional definitions of academic work, and professional work that does not fit the support or management definitions.

The third space has dual implications on the impact of our work - firstly, falling outside of an understood role dichotomy means we often lack the credibility ascribed to traditional staff roles. We find ourselves 'figuratively stacking our blocks on the table high enough that academics will see [us] as worthy colleagues' (Kinash & Wood, 2013: 183).

Secondly, we find ourselves locked out of career progression opportunities and lack systems to celebrate our work, and our work is not articulated in HR systems or enterprise agreements (Berman & Pitman, 2010). Recognition is a key factor in impact and without systematic facilitation of this our impact is lost.

Calls to change: potential futures for learning design

There are many potential futures and professional evolutions for learning design described in the literature - a selection of these are captured below to give shape to the narratives of change in the sector and within the profession.

Practice shift

Perhaps the most commonly encountered change narrative in the sector is calling learning designers to adapt their practice to align with pedagogical and technical change. The nature of these narratives have changed over time, but conceptually they remain the same in terms of calling for an adaptation of teaching knowledge and practice to suit new markets, new learner needs and so on. Over time we have seen conceptual narratives such as digital natives (Prensky, 2001), disruptive innovation (Christensen, 2010) and the flipped classroom (Bishop & Verlager, 2013) . Now, we see a 'future of work' narrative where we are compelled to design learning for future workers, who must survive in the face of an onslaught of artificial intelligence and robots (Kumar & Goldberg, 2018; Stockton, Filipova & Monaghan 2018).

The practice shift is also expressed through an academic lens of continuous improvement, with calls to develop and improve our practice through scholarship and rigour (Seeto & Harrington, 2006; Land, 2001; Boud & Brew, 2013).

Change agent via stealth

Ramos-Torrescano suggests that learning designers have the ability to act as 'stealth' change agents:

> ' [we] have a unique role that gives them access to the three primary stakeholders at a university: faculty, administration, and students. Acting in a supportive, non-threatening role, instructional designers have the opportunity to create change without having to move the weighty levers of the academic machine.' (2017)

This stealth model is framed on the act of learning design - acting as a pedagogical 'therapist', leading by example in our own teaching practice, and asking questions situated in the course design. Change in this instance is largely coceptualised in the curriculum domain.

'Academic provocateur'

Fraser suggests dropping the term developer or designer, and instead embrace an identity of an academic or educational provocateur - defined as 'someone who makes a constructive kind of trouble' (2001: 63). The provocative nature of such a role is not fully explored by Fraser, but hints towards facilitating reflection on role and identity of the academics we engage with, and reflecting on the effects our own values and agendas have on those we work with. Despite this work being almost 20 years old, the findings in the first sections of this paper suggest that there has been little movement into the 'provocateur' space in the learning design space to date.

Transformative social practice
Campbell, Schwier and Kenny present an alternate vision of the learning designer, as 'an agent of social change at the personal, relational and institutional levels' (2005: 2). This vision necessitates embracing our agency as enablers of cultural learning and cultural change, not acting under management direction but enacting our own value-based purpose.

Partners in arms
Debowski takes a different view, and suggests that we move away from the concept of being agents of change, which may suggest an invincibile fixed entity acting upon others, and instead frame our role as 'partners in arms' - 'ready to adapt our perspectives to accommodate the views and needs of our academic communities' (2014: 51). This shift also entails moving away from identities as experts in pedagogy and design and becoming co-learners with academic staff, as well as critically reflecting on our own values and practices and the ways in which our perspectives can be adapted.

Most discussion of change in learning design focus on effecting change through our traditional expertise domains - pedagogy, design, technology. As if by honing our expertise a little harder, selling pedagogy a little more, we will somehow crack the code and overcome the issues that stifle our impact. But, as Campbell, Schwier and Kenny note, this dominant discourse on the domains of learning design 'de-skills the instructional designer in HE institutions in fundamental human ways' (2005: 22). When we continue to focus on the principles and process of learning design outside of social, cultural and personal contexts, we enable the ongoing stifling of our ability to effect change. Shifting our attention to the human domains of the social, cultural and personal is a potential way to break this cycle and create new paths to explore means of transformation.

Building on the concepts of transformative social practice and partners in arms, I propose a new possible future that builds on social transformation and co-learning - one in which learning designers step outside of their traditional expertise domains into the messy ocean of the social, cultural and personal and reclaim the human skills 'dehumanised' from us by the dominant discourse. Transferring our design skills from the design of pedagogy and learning environments to the design of human interaction, social experiences and acts of culture creates new spaces for agency and impact.

Shaping the university from the third space: Reclaiming humanness

Rather than defining our work as learning design in particular, embracing our third space identity offers a different paradigm through which we can conceptualise our work. Kogan and Tiechler notably define third space staff, regardless of particular title or role, thus:

"[academic staff] are professionals in academic matters, but amateurs in matters of shaping the university and a new group of experts are amateurs in academic matters but professionals in shaping the university" (2007: 14).

Putting aside the rather misguided notion of being 'amateurs in academic matters', claiming the mantle of being professionals in shaping the university affords us unique opportunities to effect change and build knowledge economies unconfined to the traditional work of learning design.

Harland and Staniforth talk about the work of learning designers as 'strategically fill[ing] various 'niches' to meet the changing needs of the academic workforce' (2008: 671). A deliberate claiming of this role in shaping the university represents a filling of a new kind of niche. This claiming would necessitate some examination of what Fyffe (2018) refers to as our 'idea of the university', and involves reconceptualising our identity and purpose from that of effecting change through pedagogical expertise driving curriculum reform to effecting change through the human shape of our entire role. However, exploring this niche offers us greater opportunity to effect change, and may enable our traditional work to have greater impact.

Shifting our lens from the design of learning to the shaping of the university affords us the ability to broaden our skill domains out into the human skills necessary to shape the social, cultural and personal aspects of our institutions. These human skills include the personal and interpersonal skills traditionally but problematically referred to as 'soft skills' (Godin, 2007; Matteson, Anderson & Boyden, 2016), as well as transformative skills in leadership, mentoring and culture, building.

Bath and Smith note that 'academic developers enjoy some occupational freedoms not available to our academic colleagues' (2004: 20). These freedoms afforded to us by the nature of our work and the nature of the third space provide unique opportunities for us to engage with grass-roots level change and use our ambiguity to our advantage (Whitchurch, 2008: 10). The partnership SME/learning design structure and our responsibility for the delivery of professional development are common work streams across the sector that mean we will continue to be consistently engaged on a personal basis with staff across the university. These conversations provide us with the ability to shape new spaces, new rituals and new economies of knowledge.

The nature of these conversations is key - if it is true that our 'credibility rests in knowing what to say' (Fyffe, 2018: 359), and that 'making a critical difference demands subversion of the dominant discourse' (Campbell, Schwier and Kenny, 2005: 11), then turning our conversations, interactions and rituals from the languages of learning design to the languages of culture, identity and relationship could be a transformative act. Conversation becomes our tool of university-shaping. As Kegan & Lahey (2001) note, 'sustained learning of a transformational sort may require a social arrangement that supports it'.

When we consider approaching these conversations as shaping tools and areas for active design, they exist in two parts: what we say, and what we do. While my intention in this paper is

not to exhaustively articulate action in this area, some potential areas for exploration can be drawn from the organisational culture literature.

What we say

The languages that we use - to ourselves, to our colleagues, to our stakeholders, to our institutions - are a vast and largely unexcavated landscape. Kegan & Lahey (2001) state that true, sustainable change cannot be achieved until we diagnose our own immunities to change and construct strategies to overcome them, and that unpacking and transforming the way we talk, our languages and conversations, is the key to achieving this. By consciously crafting and humanising the languages we use, we have the ability to shape our interlocutors and our work.

What we do

The term 'rituals' refers to the engagement in a set of behaviours, scripts and interactions. In higher education our rituals are frequently 'default', with no conscious thought devoted to them. Ozenc & Hagan (2017:1) assert that 'good organisational culture can be created with intentionality' and that 'rituals can be designed intentionally, using a design process'. Our design skills equip us well to dive into this space and begin intentionally crafting the rituals we engage in, actively shaping the university through conscious acts of human interaction.

Further reading into the organisational culture literature, along with leadership and management literature, may provide further insights into potential ways we can craft our conversations, design rituals and interactions and otherwise forefront human skills in our work.

Conclusion - pedagogy doesn't create change, humans do

By consciously embracing our agency as university-shapers in each conversation our work affords, and focusing design efforts not on pedagogy but on human interaction, culture, ritual, learning designers may have an opportunity to become true change agents and overcome issues that stifle the impact of our learning design work. This type of future, moving away from small reconfigurations within the same domains into entirely new domains, seems worthy of pursuing given the lack of widespread transformation in the sector to date. The identity of 'university-shaper' may also provide some opportunities for coherence in the professional community, transcending particular institutional vagaries and acknowledging the commonality we experience in working in a culture, shaping the organisation in some way.

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