

Maybe It's Us: Imagining Organisational Learning Design

Thanks [chair].

I'd like to begin by acknowledging the Anaiwan people as the traditional custodians of the land I am presenting from today, and acknowledge the many other traditional custodians of the lands you are all connecting in from. I pay my respects to their elders across time. I'd also like to acknowledge the influence of Indigenous scholars on my work today, and their role in shaping my thinking.

Before I get started, I'd like to thank Reviewer 2, for pointing out that this paper is a narrative instead of formal research, because they are correct. It's an idea, a story, a start of a conversation - because I needed to create an artefact of change (more about that later).

They also pointed out that I did not mention computers, which is also correct. This is not about computers or educational technologies. However, if one wants to talk to learning designers, one has to go where the learning designers are. I can't see you right now but I suspect at least some of you are here and that's enough for me. So, sorry about the computers thing.

I'd like to begin by briefly explaining how this presentation will work, which is, as some of you may expect by now, not exactly a normal presentation. I'm using a website, not slides, which you call all access via the link in the chat, and you can choose how you want to interact with that and with me. If you're the type of person who enjoys the presentation bit, you can follow along as I speak instead of trying to squint at my shared screen. If you prefer to engage with things on your own terms then you can explore the site at will and not listen to me and you'll still see everything I have to say. If you're the type of person who prefers to interact and **do** things, then you can completely not listen to me at all and do the hands-on design activity instead. It's also much more accessible than a powerpoint and you can revisit it at any point and share it with anyone.

So here we go - you choose, and I'll speak.

Maybe It's Us: Imagining Organisational Learning Design.

We begin with:

Higher Education in 2020: Portrait of a sector on fire

We are a sector in crisis. Funding. Casualisation. Bushfires. Pandemic.

This is often framed as being victims of circumstance - things that keep happening to us. But what if it's actually about our ability to respond to things that happen? The organisational learning and organisational culture literatures have long portrayed universities as counter-examples - institutions with toxic cultures that fail to learn from themselves. What if they're right? What if this is actually a crisis of organisational learning and culture?

So then we ask:

Who's going to fix it?

Organisational learning and culture in universities is an old problem, not a new one. But it's a problem we tend to try and solve by looking to someone else, someone with greater agency, someone who's not us. An adultier adult, if you will.

A Brief Tour of Adultier Adults

Some of the entities we have historically looked to to address organisational learning and culture, and look at why their impact has been limited.

- Leadership - VCs and other university executives. This seems a logical place to situate responsibility, but as it turns out we doesn't have a a lot of faith in their capabilities. There's also argument in the literature that culture is everyone's responsibility, not just leadership, so it's not necessarily the most effective place to look.
- HR and OD departments - these are places traditionally tasked with programs and initiatives around organisational culture and learning. However, their programs often follow a corporate training model instead of employing effective learning models and pedagogical practices. Their programs also often lack systemisation and reach few staff.
- External consultants - these are frequently brought in at great cost, but generally fail to have sustained impact because they are divorced from the organisational context. Tyson Yunkaporta (if you haven't read Sand Talk, you really should) says complex systems can only be changed by agents within the system, native to the context. They can't be changed by outsiders.
- Academic Development units - these often do offer programs designed on effective learning principles, but their focus is on the scholarship of teaching and learning instead

of developing staff capability in organisational learning and culture. So the medium is right, but the discipline is wrong.

- The SMEs - academics in the organisational behaviour disciplines. They have a wealth of theoretical expertise, but lack agency due to being compelled to function as academics rather than practitioners. Their KPIs are in research and teaching, not changing the organisation.
- Learning Designers - wait what? Nobody looks to us to address organisational learning and culture...!

Maybe they should.

Instead of looking to others, what if we looked to ourselves? Learning design (and its related roles - educational development, instructional design, educational technologists and so on) has many affordances and capabilities that could be applied in new domains to create a new type of work: organisational learning design.

We are experts in pedagogy and the design of effective learning. We are experts in design processes. We are systems thinkers. Even though we might not know it, we have lived expertise in shaping organisational behaviour, because our work is change and we live it every day. We are stealth change agents. We are deeply embedded in the organisational context. And critically, we exist in the third space - we have agency and freedoms in how we shape our work that other 'adultier adults' do not.

What if we explored the Venn diagram of these capabilities to work into new domains? What if, instead of designing the learning of students, we began to design the learning of our organisations? What if we designed our culture?

So then we ask:

What would an Organisational Learning Designer do?

This is a key area for further exploration - today is the start of this conversation. Wandering through various literatures across individual learning, organisational learning, organisational culture and psychology give us some interesting ideas for places to start though, some of which (I hope) I am embodying here for you today and enact daily in my own practice.

- Designing organisational domains - we could apply design thinking processes to the rituals, languages and artefacts of our institutions. You can get started on this one now if

you like - skip ahead to the activity at the bottom of the page. This particular point is why I couldn't write a traditional paper, why I couldn't give a standard powerpoint presentation - I needed to take the artefact of the conference paper and the ritual of the conference presentation and embody them redesigned. It was that or die of my own irony and I prefer being able to sleep at night.

- Organisational learning practices - we could integrate double and triple loop learning (essentially the notions of addressing how and why we do what we do, respectively) into our work practices
- Psychological safety - we could design work environments that promote psychological safety. We have OH&S for physical safety, but what keeps a brain safe? What keeps a relationship safe?
- Constructive alignment - we could apply the principles of constructive alignment to our work practices and projects. Imagine a project plan as aligned curriculum for change.
- Embodying design - we could embody our practice as designers across our institutions, planting seeds of change in "cultural islands" (effectively 'do as I do' mode). This is again something I hope I'm doing today - I hope you'll leave here talking about that time that Thorneycroft invented some wild new term and didn't follow the powerpoint rules and then maybe next time you have to do a conference presentation you think a little differently about what that could look like and why. And then someone else from some other context sees you and goes away and thinks about what you did, and next time they have to do a conference presentation they think a little differently...and so on and so on.
- Learnership - we could design and facilitate the practice of 'learnership' in our institutions (the notion of empowering people to lead their own learning - not dissimilar to the concept of heutagogy, but applied to the way people learn in organisations).

There are many more possible domains, these are just a few that fit into the concise paper limit.

A Call to Arms

So now this is where I ask you to join me. You've seen the Derek Sivers' TED talk. Today I'm the dancing guy.

Let's work together as a profession, as a community of practice, to explore and co-create this new direction. After all the narratives we've heard of looking to other 'adulter', more 'qualified', people to save our universities, people who we think should be the ones with carriage of organisational learning and culture, maybe it's time to embrace our agency and say - it's not you, it's us.

For those of you who haven't skipped ahead while I've been talking, we've now reached the end of the talking part and have arrived at the doing part. Unfortunately the webinar format means this would be an awkward silence kind of situation if we tried to workshop it verbally, so what I'll do is give a very quick briefing of the activity, and then if you want to play along you can get started while we move into question time. You can use the form to submit anything you design, and I'll collate them all and post them on the website after the conference.

Ritual Design is effectively the practice of applying design thinking methodology to the design of the rituals we undertake in our organisations. A ritual can be anything - a meeting, a presentation, a conversation - and can be designed in the same way we would design a course or unit or product. So your brief here is to take an example of a ritual and redesign it as an effective learning experience, or to achieve some kind of change in your organisation. What would you want to happen? What would you do differently? What would it achieve?

Obviously this is a five minute activity in a conference presentation so scope is somewhat limited - but focus on what Ozenc calls 'new small moments to spark something meaningful'. I'd love to collect a range of small moments from all of you, to spark something meaningful.

Thanks for listening and engaging. You can always find me on Twitter to keep the conversation going, and you can also find a full transcript of this presentation on my website.