HERDSA

Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia Inc

Research and Development in Higher Education:
Next Generation, Higher Education: Challenges, Changes and Opportunities

Volume 42

Refereed papers based on contributions to
the
42nd HERDSA Annual International Conference

2-5 July 2019
The University of Auckland Science Centre, Auckland, New Zealand

This research paper was reviewed using a double blind peer review process that meets DIISR requirements. Two reviewers were appointed on the basis of their independence and they reviewed the full paper devoid of the authors' names and institutions in order to ensure objectivity and anonymity. Papers were reviewed according to specified criteria, including relevance to the conference theme and audience, soundness of the research methods and critical analysis, originality and contribution to scholarship, and clear and coherent presentation of the argument.

Learning designers as capacity builders in Australian universities

Christine Slade
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
c.slade@uq.edu.au

Jeffrey Parker
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
j.parker2@uq.edu.au

Dominic McGrath
University of Queensland, Brisbane, Australia
dom.mcgrath@uq.edu.au

Ruth Greenaway
University of the Sunshine Coast, Sippy Downs, Australia
rgreenaw@usc.edu.au

Central teaching and learning centres are responsible for translating new sectoral and institutional strategic priorities into practice. In response, directors look to recruit, employ and retain learning designers (also called educational designers or similar) to increase existing capacity. Learning designers play a vital role in building institutional capacity through sustained technological and pedagogical innovation, to meet these sector demands and the continually changing academic and professional practices. More research is needed about how best to attract and retain new learning designers both from an institutional and employee perspective. The researchers designed two separate surveys to target the following stakeholder groups: 1) directors of central teaching and learning centres, and 2) learning designers employed under the auspices of these centres. After gaining human ethics approval, the researchers used online surveys for data collection. Potential participants were contacted through publicly available professional email addresses and professional networks which directed members to the project webpage, containing links to both surveys. Twenty-one directors and 103 learning designers responded. Data were coded and analysed using descriptive statistics and NVivo Pro 11. The results provide new empirical data for directors and learning designers to understand the roles and responsibilities of learning designers and the importance of identity and agency within this emerging cohort of professionals who contribute to institutional and sectoral capacity.

Keywords: Learning designer, roles and responsibilities, identity and agency

Introduction

Heightened neoliberal government expectations for universities to embrace a corporate market-driven agenda has changed the management and delivery of student learning needs (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Veles & Carter, 2016). Universities seek greater capacity to manage the downward shift of sector priorities. Strategic teaching and learning priorities fall to directors of centralised teaching and learning centres, which can test existing capacity. Budget holders are expected to absorb extra responsibility irrespective of capacity (Mendes, 2007). Internal threats

of significant restructuring or reorganising place further pressure on these centres (Gosling, 2008). The mission, organisational structures and roles of teaching and learning centres in Australian universities are significantly impacted by these demands as they seek to lead timely academic development responses.

Researchers identify key areas of widening teaching and learning centre responsibility. Such responsibilities are undertaken within the context of each institutional milieu (Ling & CADAD, 2009). The areas include scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL) (Ling & CADAD, 2009); learning technologies, leadership and management (Palmer, Holt, & Challis, 2010); professional development of faculty, innovative teaching practices and implementing strategic plans (Gosling, 2008; Gosling, 2009; Holt, Palmer, & Challis, 2011); and quality assurance (Gosling, 2009). Midst these pressured environments, the centres are a pivotal level of capacity building across institutions, working in collaboration with institutional decision makers, faculties and schools, and students.

Centre staff need to keep up with changing priorities while maintaining a focus on enhancing teaching and learning principles and practices. Directors seek to build internal capacity to meet institutional needs, with significant reliance on employing agile and innovative staff within constrained budgets. Learning designers (also called educational or instructional designers, or educational developers or technologists to name a few title variations) are an emerging cohort of professionals whose various roles and responsibilities, identity and agency contribute to the effective delivery of innovative priorities across the sector. Successful recruitment, employment and retention of learning designers is vital to the broadening agenda of responsibilities (Slade, McGrath, Greenaway, & Parker, 2019).

Universities intending to build capacity by increasing the number and impact of learning designers require further understanding about learning designer roles and responsibilities, and the challenges and enablers that influence their identity and agency in undertaking these roles. In response, this paper provides supporting evidence to assist capacity building for both directors in employing learning designers, and for learning designers to understand the sector environment in which they are employed. The guiding research questions are:
- What roles and responsibilities do learning designers undertake?
- What challenges and enablers influence learning designers' identity and agency?

This paper expands on themes showcased at the HERDSA 2019 conference. It addresses two clusters of the conference's sub-themes - Academics: Academic development, changing academic practice, work and identity, and Tertiary institutions: Technologies, leadership, new developments, sustainability.

Literature review

Key discourses in scholarly literature about professional staff, and learning designers in particular, are pertinent to this research, namely 1) roles and responsibilities 2) identity, and 3) agency. The application of these discourses to this research was refined through an iterative analytical process that included the authors' experience, advertised position descriptions, survey results and exploration of literature. This section discusses them in turn.

Learning designer roles and responsibilities
The role of a learning designer has broadened from helping individual academics introduce new technologies into curriculum (Browne & Beetham, 2010) to include design and development,

support, management, training faculty, and research and evaluation (Obexer & Giardina, 2016). In North America, researchers report how instructional designers use their time predominantly in design/development and managing projects (Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003). A survey of 853 instructional designers, predominantly from the USA, by Intentional Futures (2016) found that they have four key roles:

- design instructional materials and courses, particularly for digital delivery
- manage the efforts of faculty, administration, IT, other instructional designers, and others to achieve better student learning
- train faculty to leverage technology and implement pedagogy effectively
- support faculty when they run into technical or instructional challenges (p.3).

Similarly, an examination of 37 advertised job descriptions for Technology Enhanced Learning (TEL) staff (academic developer, designer and technologist) in Australian universities, by Mitchell, Simpson and Adach (2017) proposes designers primarily design, support and advise, and to a lesser degree, train. Slade et al. (2019) found that learning designers undertake multiple roles, in different combinations with each response being unique to how frequently the activities are undertaken (Figure 1).
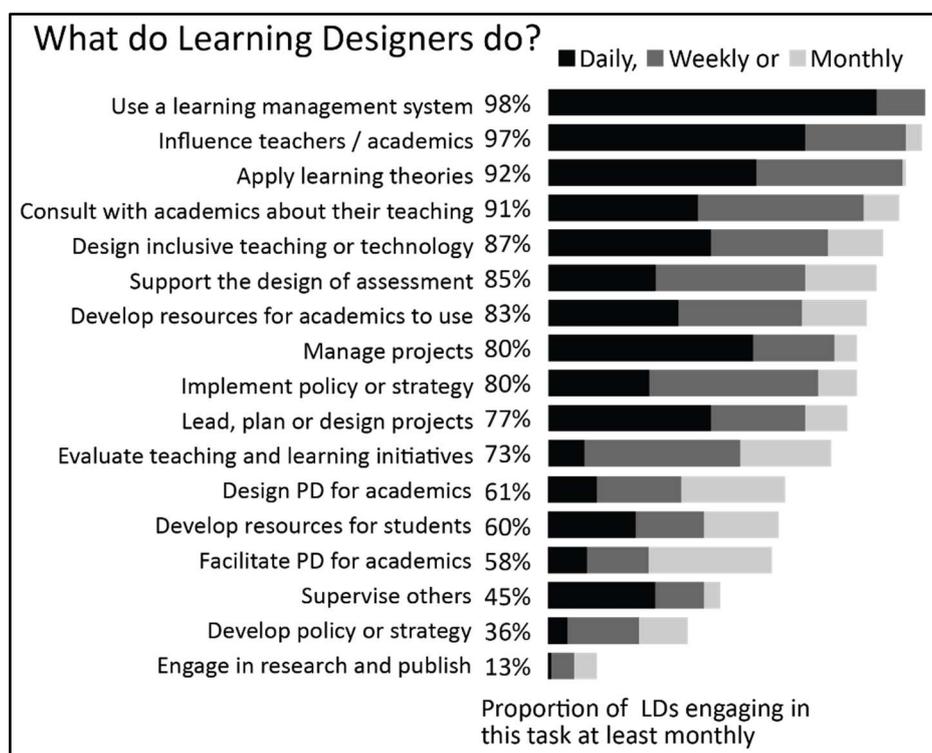
Figure 1: Roles and frequencies of activities

In summary, Table 1 shows the roles of learning designers as found in the literature and outlines the expansion of these roles. The tension between increasing capacity and discovering, defining and enacting responsive roles needs to be resolved so that vital internal capacity can be established (Slade, 2014). Yet, our understanding of the specific roles and combination of roles played by learning designers across the sector in Australia is still limited.

Table 1: Learning designer roles in literature

Authors	Date	Design Develop	Manage Projects	Support Advise	Train Faculty	Research Evaluate
Cox & Osguthorpe	2003	x	x			
Browne & Beetham	2010	x		x	x	
Intentional Futures	2016	x	x	x	x	
Obexer & Giardina	2016	x	x	x	x	x
Mitchell et al.	2017	x		x	x	x
Slade et al.	2019	x	x	x	x	x

Professional identity of learning designers

Research investigating the professional identity of learning designers is a late entrant to the work of staff identities in higher education, which previously focused on academic identity and saw professional staff as invisible (Gray, 2015). Identity refers to a person's 'sense of self' (Ecclestone, 2007, p. 121). Identity can be defined as 'the ways in which the self is represented and understood in dynamic, multidimensional and evolving ways…ways in which the social, personal and cultural meet' (Ecclestone 2007, p.122). Professional identity [is] understood as the interplay of the agency of the individual with the structures and boundaries that they encounter (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010). Yet little is known about the professional identities of learning designers who play an important capacity building role across changing institutions.

The concept of the 'third space professionals' articulates the opportunity to consider new identities as staff, such as learning designers, step into the professional space of other staff, such as academics or other professional staff who support teaching (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Gray, 2015). However, this blurring of roles across boundaries, can impact the existing identity of professional staff (Whitchurch & Gordon, 2010; Graham, 2012; Gray, 2015). Role ambiguity and institutional strategic changes, restructuring and alignment with central priorities can cause tension between learning designers and academics, overall making a complex environment in which to forge an identity (Hanson, 2013).

Professional agency of learning designers

The fluid boundaries of third space professional roles can extend the agency of learning designers. Ecclestone (2007) defines agency 'as a person's capacity for autonomous, empowered action' (p. 121). Eteläpelto, Vähäsantanen, Hökkä and Paloniemi (2013) place this agency into a professional context and suggest that it is also 'needed for professional learning and for the renegotiation of work-related identities in (changing) work practices' (p. 62).

Literature supports the concept that learning designers have robust agency and are vital in initiating and maintaining change (Veles, Carter & Boon, 2018; Obexer & Giardina, 2016, Whitchurch, 2012). A longitudinal study of Canadian instructional designers by Campbell, Schwier and Kenny (2009) suggests that instructional designers (similar to learning designers) possess agency as they:

- think deeply about their practice and that their professional and personal identities are deeply intertwined
- feel responsibility for more things than they have authority to influence, and
- regularly find themselves in positions that require them to act beyond their authority, or in a vacuum of authority (p. 660).

However, while directors need learning designers to meet sector and university priorities, employing learning designers can challenge existing institutional capacity in structures and

processes. Similarly, as learning designers build agency, they can find themselves in conflict with other institutional priorities, that have "an adverse impact on the agency, advocacy and relationship building teaching support staff require to be effective" (Winslett, 2016, p. 546). This research aims to provide further understanding about the roles, identity and agency of learning designers, and the perceptions of centre directors.

Research context and survey design

An academic, an academic developer, learning designer and experienced qualitative research assistant from two Australian universities' central teaching and learning centres undertook this research as a result of their interest in this topic. They received a grant from the Council of Australian Directors of Academic Development (CADAD) to design and deliver two online surveys, using Survey Monkey software, targeted as 1) directors of central teaching and learning centres (n=40), and 2) learning designers employed in universities (number unknown). Themes for the surveys were informed by a pilot scan of publicly advertised learning design (or equivalent) positions (n=38) across Australian universities in the second half of 2016 and the research team's knowledge and experience in this area.

Data collection and analysis

Human ethics permission was granted by The University of Queensland and ratified by the University of the Sunshine Coast in early 2017. Directors and learning designers working in Australian universities were invited to complete the respective online surveys. Potential director respondents were contacted via their publicly advertised professional email addresses, with the online survey available using a link in the email. The researchers also contacted professional networks and associations to distribute the research information, consent documentation and survey links to members. There is no comprehensive means known to contact learning designers within Australia. Therefore, the exact number of learning designers employed by Australian universities is not readily available.

Of the twenty questions included in the Learning Designer Survey, this paper focuses on two qualitative questions, asking the respondents to elaborate on "How do you describe the role of a learning designer?" (Question 6: LD6) [Answered: 97, Skipped: 6]; and "Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?" (Question 20: LD20) [Answered: 35, Skipped: 68].

Similarly, four qualitatively focused questions were also used in the directors' version of the survey, including the same "How do you describe the role of a 'learning designer'?" (Question 5: D5) [Answered: 19, Skipped: 2] and "Do you have any other comments, questions, or concerns?" (Question 13: D13) [Answered: 9, Skipped: 12] questions, and a further two questions aimed at understanding "What is your greatest challenge in recruiting Learning Designers?" (Question 6: D6) [Answered: 19, Skipped: 2]; and "What is your greatest challenge in retaining effective Learning Designers?" (Question 10: D10) [Answered: 14, Skipped: 7].

NVivo 11 Pro software was utilised to examine the qualitative questions and subsequently code responses in terms of the commonalties, disparities and intersections that emerged. Results were discussed iteratively between members of the research team to ensure agreement. Coding included respondent number, question answered and then respondent role i.e. learning designer (LD) or director (D). Two indicators of weighting are provided: the number of respondents identifying a theme and the coverage, the percentage of characters of the total responses coded

to a specific theme. Results were sorted to highlight the inter-relationships between the thematic ideas of roles and responsibilities, identity and agency for learning designers.

Results

Twenty-one directors responded to the survey, which is 50 per cent of the available sample of Australian institutions. One hundred and three learning designers also responded to their survey, which was a good sample size across institutions. A summary of the emergent themes from the survey's qualitative questions and mapped to the literature discourses is outlined in Table 2.

Table 2: Emergent themes and example quotes

Discourse	Emergent themes	Example quotes from survey questions (LD & D)
Roles and responsibilities	Multitasking and combination roles (LD6:51%, D5:54%)	*…developing curricula, providing support to academics on teaching practice, using technology, etc.* (LD6)
	Advising, training and support (LD6:32%, D5:28%)	*large part academic training and support* (LD6)
	Design – pedagogical (LD6:64%, D5:59%) & technical (LD6:17%, D5:22%)	*Design learning experiences* (LD6) *Part creative design* (LD6) *…the bridge between pedagogy and technology* (D5)
Identity	Blurring of roles (LD6:28%, D5:23%) Evolution of roles (LD6:10%, D5:9%)	*Instructional/pedagogical designer, educational designer, curriculum designer, assessment designer, graphic designer, spatial designer, systems, and technical designer* (LD6) *The role is shifting* (D5)
	Collaborators (LD6:37%, D5:55%)	*…working with academics to design* (D6) *Partner with Unit Coordinators and teaching teams to develop active learning strategies* (LD6)
Agency	Challenge, frustration and barriers	*Herding cats and juggling balls!* (LD6) *…motivation in the face of resistance by academics* (D10)
	Misconceptions about role (LD20:27%, D13:53%)	*The manifest lack of understanding of the role and context of a learning designer among executive staff is a fundamental problem* (LD20) *Senior people have little understanding of the role of learning designers…etc. This leads to under- utilisation and disconnection in many cases* (D13)
	Non-recognition (LD6:1.3%, D5:0) Underappreciated (LD20:24%, D13:17%)	*Not enough time to keep up with new developments and reading. Not enough money to attend conferences. Very little professional development offered by my employer* (LD20)

Learning designer roles and responsibilities
In defining the role of a learning designer from their own perspectives, the majority of the respondents (LD6:51%) discussed how the qualities of versatility and adaptability are essential to their competency. Most respondents agreed how learning design is characterised through "using a range of skills to understand learning requirements or outcomes" [respondent 22, Q6, LD]. A number of the participants expressed a very positive attitude when articulating the versatility that they saw as central to their roles. Examples of how learning designers self-described their vocational multitasking with enthusiasm and pride include expressions such as "a Jill of many trades" [respondent 3, Q6, LD], and the role being described as one of "problem solver, interpreter, explorer, explainer, influencer" [respondent 20, Q6, LD]. This ability to combine and apply a versatile range of professional skills is invaluable to capacity building.

A segment of respondents (LD6:32%, D5:28%) articulated the centrality of providing advice, training and support to others in their duties as learning designers. Many of the respondents view a key duty as "professional development, and technology guide and trouble-shooter" [respondent 27, Q6, LD] for the colleagues that they work with. They also saw the learning designer role as a fundamental support person for teams of teaching professionals in a rapidly changing educational landscape. In this manner their duties not only involve an essential and logistical service to "provide LMS support, provide regular & just in time PD" [respondent 90, Q6, LD], but this is extended to what respondents see as support in the form of "a shoulder, a listening ear" [respondent 90] extended to colleagues whose traditional skill base is not as equipped to manage this shifting educational landscape.

Most respondents acknowledge the centrality of both technical and pedagogical aspects of the role. Forty-five (46%) learning designers and 15 (79%) directors explicitly identified learning design as combining technology and pedagogy, often with recognition of the ubiquity of technology in education: "work with academics to assist them in the understanding of educational principles, planning and developing activities and the use of technology in their teaching." (LD). Forty-five (46%) learning designers and four (21%) directors described the role without reference to technology: "Working with academic staff to design/develop the curriculum, learning activities and assessment for topics/subjects" (D) and only one learning designer described the role entirely around technology: "teaching teachers how to use technology" (LD).

Importantly, certain respondents note that the role of the learning designer is to some extent context specific and, as such, its specifications "depends on the institution" [respondent 97, Q6, LD]. Common criteria of the role despite institutional variations, however, were expressed as being inherit in the "design" aspects of the position. For example, one respondent explained how the job "essentially involves skills related to pedagogy across modes (often blended and online). This often means a combination of curriculum design, instructional design and technical design (i.e. through digital tools, learning management systems, etc.) duties" [respondent 97, Q6, LD]. In responding to the same question, "How do you describe the role of a 'learning designer'?", the 33 directors that answered this survey question were also in agreement that the position is characterised as a combination role, acting as "the bridge between pedagogy and technology" [respondent 14, Q5, D].

Professional identity of learning designers
Responses of learning designers and of directors (LD6:10%, D5:9%) identified the learning design role as continually evolving, expanding and being refined. This was driven by the interactive nature of the position which was frequently described as involving constant

productive consultation with academics to design innovative teaching content, and a continuous "ability to understand and advocate for students" [respondent 94, Q6, LD] changing needs. The inherent nature of change involved in the technological dimensions of the role, where, for example, teaching software and blended learning platforms are continually improved and updated, was also a key factor in how learning design is a field in which adaptability to change is a constant requirement.

Directors articulate the enhancement of learning as a key focus of the learning designer capacity, particularly in terms of "designing curriculum and embedding technology" [respondent 19, Q5, D] to enhance the student experience. Such enhancement was usually described as contributing to the development of blended learning contexts, where directors require learning designers to work "with academics to design instruction for the purposes of learning using technology both online and in the face to face classroom" [respondent 6, Q5, D]. Learning designers also emphasised the collaborative aspects of the role, particularly in terms of support for "the academic teaching community in the design, development and delivery of technology enhanced learning resources" [respondent 16, Q5, D].

Professional agency of learning designers

Survey responses highlight the challenges to agency for learning designers in advising decision-makers e.g. academics have final say in their curriculum development, being constrained by role misconceptions and limited formal opportunities to develop in a rapidly changing sector. Learning designers have agency in strategic and innovation areas and are often employed to be change agents. How they interpret and support various projects significantly impacts institutional rollout of changes.

Learning designer respondents are very aware of the need for the role to be defined, particularly in terms of confusion of roles, which limit agency. Comments from respondents include:

> …. It's such a growth area but still a lot of misconceptions around the scope and duties of the role (as my own responses reveal!) and a constantly shifting space [respondent 35, Q20, LD].

and

> learning design doesn't seem to have a stable definition, and shifts to the needs, but seems invaluable and far more appreciated than centralised generic phone support structures, needs more attention [respondent 20, Q20, LD].

and

> The value of learning design for a predominantly online university cannot be overstated, however there is very little opportunity to undertake learning design consultation with receptive academics… Support for strategic learning design is limited and at present occurs on an opt-in basis in a busy/time-poor environment - which is to say, almost not at all [respondent 25, Q20, LD].

The learning designers stressed the need for ongoing professional development and training in their work with one quarter of the responses to Question 20 being devoted to this issue. The amount and level of such training was described as dependent on one's degree of expertise across a range of fields, rather than focusing on increasing capabilities in a singular field. For example, *"Your skills scope across technology, curriculum and design…most [learning designers] have one area where their main strength is and continue to build skills in other areas"* [respondent 3, Q6, LD].

With a view to embracing the changing educational needs and potentials of contemporary tertiary institutions, directors also seem acutely aware that the position of learning designer is at the forefront of providing the necessary innovation for their operational approaches. Learning designers are valued for their expertise and initiatives in "course redesign and curriculum conceptualisation" and furthermore, for their "contribution to professional development" [respondent 10, Q5, D] in facilitating the diffusion of innovative skill sets to other team members who may have more traditionally-based backgrounds.

Discussion and implications for practice

This research recognises the emergence, growth and significance of learning designers as educational professionals, particularly in building capacity to respond to changing sector and institutional teaching and learning priorities. Despite teething difficulties, highlighted in the literature and by the qualitative data presented here, "such roles are essential as universities are responding to a set of drivers prompting them to examine and re-conceptualize their learning and teaching strategies" (Obexer & Giardina, 2016, p.145). A key finding of the study is that learning designers are more likely to identify problems arising from a lack of clear parameters in defining the role itself, whilst directors are more likely to perceive these challenges as encountered during the occupational landscape of the operative aspect of the role.

Even the titles of learning designer roles are fraught with uncertainty due to the variation in titles and broad expectations of the roles. The role of the learning designer is blurred between the roles of the learning designers, academic developers and e-learning staff (LMS/VLE type work) which is complicated by challenges in classifying the role and even explaining what learning designers do (Whitchurch, 2008; Gray, 2015; Veles & Carter, 2016; Mitchell et al., 2017). Directors need to recognise this contentious space and professionally develop their 'third space professionals' (Veles, Carter & Boon, 2018; Whitchurch, 2012) and support these staff as they cross boundaries in their day-to-day work.

The requirement for perpetual multitasking and versatility that was reported by the learning design respondents when describing their roles, is indicative of one of the major vocational shifts from the more singularly focused "shape" and competencies of the traditional educational professional, and requires a rethinking of how such roles are defined.

Aiming to delineate the necessary skill set for learning designers, Obexer and Giardina (2016) emphasise the need for them to act as "translators" between stakeholders in academic, technical and administrative areas of the organization" (p.144). The qualitative results from our study support this need for productive communication, including skills in explaining learning designer roles to those they support.

Wider recognition of the essential need for ongoing professional development in this role was called for by learning designer respondents. This situation may be discouraging potential learning designers from entering in or staying in the field, which could be having repercussions for institutions seeking to fill current and future positions – resulting in a skill shortage.

Directors also expressed an awareness of the need for facilitating tailored professional development for employed learning designers to varying degrees. Learning designers want a diverse range of opportunities in which to improve their skills and knowledge. This can cause a point of tension between directors and learning designers, requiring more open discussions

between directors and learning designers about the time required for self-learning and tolerance around communication and skill learning needs.

Conclusions

This paper examines the roles and responsibilities, identity and agency of learning designers in building capacity towards sustainable teaching and learning outcomes. Learning designers are an emerging cohort of professionals whose role is still undergoing definition. They are motivated, self-directed learners and an agile and mobile workforce whose work across the third space can bring challenges to existing structures and processes. This research may assist learning designers in understanding the current work environment and assist directors to build appropriate position descriptions and engage with learning designers about professional development pathways. Further research is warranted about the roles of other teaching and learning professional staff involved in translating new priorities into practice.

Acknowledgements

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