

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Learning Design isn't a profession (yet)

Michael Henderson

Monash University

Scott Bradey

James Cook University

Keith Heggart

University of Technology Sydney

Henk Huijser

Queensland University of Technology

Kristen Morgan-May

Monash University

Nhung Nguyen

The University of Tasmania

Daniel Purdy

Western Sydney University

This symposium aims to identify key barriers and opportunities in developing learning design as a recognised profession through three provocative discussions. The first provocation challenges the distinctions among learning designers, instructional designers, educational technologists, and similar roles. The goal is to explore the potential for a unified professional identity. The second provocation addresses the lack of official recognition for learning designers, examining sociological theories of professionalisation, the implications of formalising the field, and possible next steps. The third provocation asks what could and should be included in a formal education pathway. As a starting point this provocation will include the comparison of curricula from Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, and University of Technology Sydney. Attendees will engage in lively discussions and contribute insights to advance the recognition and development of learning design as a profession.

Keywords: learning design, educational design, instructional design, professionalisation, formal learning pathway, curriculum

The provocations

This symposium addresses the conference theme: Navigating the terrain. In particular we address a fundamental concern in navigating the roles and identities of those working as learning designers, educational technologists, instructional designers, and the myriad of other related job titles – all of whom are at the frontier of learning spaces, pedagogies and technologies. Learning designers occupy what Whitchurch (2008) calls a third space - one between academic and professional staff operating as “unbounded professionals” (p.383) extending their practices outside existing position descriptions to effect change (Bisset, 2018; McIntosh & Nutt, 2022).

A key goal in this symposium is to bring impassioned colleagues together to debate the desirability, barriers, and opportunities in the development of learning design as a profession, and to collectively identify potential points of action for the ASCILITE community to leverage the opportunities. The symposium is structured around three provocations:

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Provocation 1: We are more similar than different.

Learning designers, educational designers, instructional designers, educational technologists and the myriad of related roles are – we argue – more similar than different. Commentaries on the complex and diverse roles in higher education alone highlight the struggle for this collective body to establish its identity (Bisset, 2018; Henderson, et al., 2022). Within higher education, the roles are often defined in different ways. Moreover, there distinctions are often made between those working in different sectors: tertiary education, corporate and business, EdTech, government, military and other. However, in order to establish a sustainable professional identity, we propose that we would be best served to find consensus on a foundational body of knowledge or field of expertise or practices which creates a familial tie between all of the different job titles. This is aligned with theories of professionalisation in which a key characteristic of an established profession is the recognition of commonality, such as professional knowledge, values, and roles (Macdonald, 1995; Reed, 2017; Saks, 2010). This sense of coherence or family would form a key connection despite specialisations, levels of seniority and different titles and duties. The panel will invite the audience to debate whether there is a connection between roles, and whether this provides a foundation for a professional identity.

Provocation 2: Learning design is not yet a profession.

Learning design and other variations of the occupation are not listed as a profession, and indeed, outside of our specific institutions it is not even recognised as an occupation. Swimming instructors, animal trainers, web designers, graphic designers, and copywriters are listed as occupations by the Australian Taxation Office, but there is no sign of a learning designer, educational designer, instructional designer, or any other variations.

There has been a long tradition of research in the sociology of professions and several related theories variously describe the process and characteristics of professionalisation. In this symposium, we will touch on key theories that have been used to describe the nature of professionalisation, including functionalism, trait theory, feminist theory and the professional project (Macdonald, 1995; Reed, 2017; Saks, 2010). A case will be made that those who work in the broad field of learning design may be treated as professionals, but the field itself is not considered as a profession, and as such conditions such as career progression, cross-sectorial movement, employment security, and recognition of authority and skills will continue to be variable. This segment of the symposium will draw a picture of professionalisation as a constellation of collaborative, if not harmonious, efforts. These include education pathways, recognised forms of accreditation, collaborative action, and national representation. However, these actions are not necessarily positive to a highly heterogeneous group and the panel will invite the audience to consider the nature and desirability of such action.

Provocation 3: What should be included in formal education pathways?

Universities have delivered various awards around higher education teaching and learning, and about online design. However, in recent years there has been an interest in the development of degrees specifically for learning/educational/instructional designers. This segment of the symposium will offer insights into the development of graduate and undergraduate programs related to learning design at Monash University, Queensland University of Technology, and the University of Technology Sydney. The panellists will offer comparisons of the curriculum on offer from these three institutions and provide insights into why certain topics, values and skills were – and were not – included. The audience will be invited to contribute knowledge about courses they are involved in, as well as offer suggestions about what should (and should not) be taught in a formal education pathway.

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ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

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