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Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Learning designers: A socio-material snapshot of the profession

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The contemporary post-digital university is ever more dependent on the expertise and labour of 'third space' professionals such as learning designers. Reporting on the initial findings of a recent survey, this paper presents a snapshot of the people who do the work of learning design, their perspectives on their work and their contributions to teaching and learning in higher education. Four defining characteristics emerged through thematic analysis of 90 survey responses: 1) learning designers come from varied academic and professional backgrounds; 2) our job functions, working conditions and organisational settings can vary significantly; 3) our work practices—and so the knowledge and skills required for the role—can be highly diverse; 4) despite the variety, a shared motivation and sense of purpose is shaping emergent professional identities. Adopting a socio-material lens, this paper presents a rich picture of an expanding profession, providing vital insights into the practices, identities, and impact of learning designers.

Keywords: Learning design; learning designers; socio-materialism; third space professionals; professional identity

Introduction

As digital technologies are more and more entangled in practices of teaching, learning, and assessment across higher education, the contemporary post-digital university becomes ever more dependent on the expertise and labour of 'third space' professionals such as learning designers. But who are learning designers? What do we do? And why do we do it? While the input and influence of learning designers is acknowledged, a deeper understanding of our perspectives, self-conceptions, and contributions is often lacking, potentially limiting our ability to effectively advocate for our work, its impact and value.

This paper takes a snapshot of the people who do the work of learning design. It reports on some initial findings from a qualitative survey designed to understand how we view ourselves and our work, the contributions we make, and what guides and motivates us as a professional community. The paper begins by briefly reviewing the rise of learning design as a field and the growing body of research on the practice and profession. It then describes the survey methodology and considers some notable features of the demographic make-up of the sample. Developing a vibrant and multifaceted picture of the profession, it applies a socio-material lens to examine four defining characteristics which emerged through thematic analysis of the 90 survey responses: 1) the diversity of our academic and professional backgrounds; 2) the variation in working conditions and organisational settings; 3) our diverse and highly contextualised knowledge bases, skill sets, and work practices; and 4) our shared motivation and sense of purpose.

Applying a socio-material lens to analyse these themes, the paper presents a rich picture of an expanding profession. By exploring the lived experiences of learning designers, it illuminates how we define our roles and places within the broader higher education sector—how we see ourselves and how we want to be perceived. This has implications for how we advocate—both individually and collectively—for our work and its value. It could also inform staffing and resourcing decision-making within institutions, as well as the design and development of crucial professional resources such as standards, organisations, and training programs.

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Background

The rise of ‘third space’ professionals in higher education over the past decades has been well-documented (Whitchurch, 2012). ‘Third space’ professionals work at the intersection of the traditionally separate spheres of academic and professional work, occupying an ambiguous and uncertain position within organisational structures. We “are not on the frontline of university teaching but work within universities to support ... academic colleagues by providing a range of pedagogical, technological, and other expertise” (Abblitt, 2024, p. 139). On a full-time equivalent (FTE) basis, there are approximately 74,000 professional staff employed in Australian higher education (Croucher, 2023, p. 5). But there isn’t a definitive number available for ‘third space’ professionals; the concept is still relatively new and is not a traditional job category captured in either official university data or national surveys.

Learning designers are perhaps one of the more prominent groups of ‘third space’ professionals in higher education right now. We come into learning design through a variety of career pathways (Sage & Sankey, 2021), and our job roles, titles and functions continue to proliferate (Mitchell et al., 2017). We work as learning designers, but also sometimes educational designers, instructional designers, academic developers, curriculum developers, educational developers, educational technologists, learning technologists, and more—but our core work is supporting faculty in the design, development, delivery, evaluation, and enhancement of teaching, learning, and assessment. We have come to prominence alongside the rise of technology-enhanced and online learning, and the resultant advent of teaching as a design science (Conole, 2013; Laurillard, 2022; 2012)—although our expertise is not purely technical or technological. We are part of the continuing professionalisation of teaching and learning. We are a consequence of the unbundling and expansion of academic work practices (Tucker & Neely, 2010; Macfarlane, 2011) and the necessity for specialised knowledge and skills beyond subject matter expertise to teach effectively in the contemporary post-digital university. Learning design is an emerging frontier of practice and an expanding profession across higher education, but we are also in demand in primary and secondary education, vocational education and training, corporate learning and development, and the charity and non-government sectors. Over the next five years, job opportunities in the learning design field are expected to increase by 21.7% globally (SEEK, 2024).

Although there is growing interest and an emerging body of research, learning design as a profession is still sometimes poorly understood. Specific roles such as academic developer and educational technologist have longer professional histories, as well as research traditions dedicated to better understanding these practices and professions, their place within higher education and contributions to academic quality and student learning (see, for example, Bath & Smith, 2004; Kek & Hammer, 2015; Mårtensson & Roxå, 2021). Professional organisations such as the Association for Learning Technology (ALT), the International Consortium of Educational Development (ICED), the International Society for the Scholarship of Teaching and Learning (ISSOTL), the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA), and the Australasian Society for Computers in Learning in Tertiary Education (ASCILITE) have also done much to advocate for and improve understanding about these roles, fostering discourses and bringing together communities. Still, learning designers often “toil in the interstices between the more prominent teacher and student narratives” (Costello et al., 2022, p. 1). At its simplest, “[l]earning design is a practice, a process, and a profession that facilitates the systematic design and development of learning experiences” (Abblitt, 2024, p. 141). This requires a broad foundational knowledge and highly diverse skill set in the core areas of pedagogy, technology, design, and consulting (see Altena et al., 2019; MacCallum & Brown, 2022; MacLean & Scott, 2011; Ritzhaupt et al., 2021), as well as leadership (Gardner et al., 2018) and project management (Kline et al., 2020). We are consultants, communicators, collaborators, influencers, innovators, advocates, and leaders. Learning design is a highly social practice; it is “not simply ... a technical methodology to be applied to design situations, but also ... a socially constructed practice” (Campbell et al., 2009, p. 646). But learning—and so learning design—is both a social and a material practice. From a socio-material perspective, “[l]earning is an effect of the networks of the material, humans and non-humans, that identify certain practices as learning”, so that “teaching is not simply about the relationships between humans but is about the networks of humans and things through which teaching and learning are translated and enacted” (Fenwick et al., 2012, 6). Learning

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design is thus conceived as a set of relational effects unfolding within complex networks that engender connections between people, organisations, technologies, materialities, data, and discourses. Our effectiveness as learning designers—individually and as a professional community—depends on how we learn to navigate this complex, ambiguous, highly dynamic ecosystem.

Methods

The target population for the survey is ‘third space’ professionals who contribute to the work of learning design at higher education institutions in Australia. The survey comprised a series of closed-ended questions designed to capture descriptive statistics about the field, followed by open-ended questions to elicit respondents’ self-conceptions and perspectives, including descriptions of their work practices and contributions to quality and innovation in student learning. The survey was administered via Qualtrics and initially distributed in April 2024 via the social media platform LinkedIn. It was also circulated via professional networks and communities, including ASCILITE’s TELedvisors special interest group and the Australasian Association of Learning Designers (AALD). Respondents provided informed consent as part of the survey process after reviewing a participant information statement explaining the purpose, procedures, benefits, and risks of the study.

This paper reports on an initial sample of 90 responses collected over a five-week period between 23 April and 30 May 2024. Data were analysed in three phases. First, quantitative data were analysed using Qualtrics Stats IQ to describe key demographic characteristics of the sample population and the relationships between these. Second, qualitative data were analysed using Qualtrics Text IQ, coded and categorised to identify and refine common themes. Third, descriptive statistics and qualitative insights were integrated to develop a collective narrative of learning designers, weaving together recurring themes and concepts, and perspectives.

The demographic composition of the survey sample generally accords with the make-up of professional staff in Australian higher education in terms of age and gender. Table 1 shows the gender composition of the sample, which generally aligns to the percentage of women in professional roles in Australian higher education: while women remain under-represented in academic roles, they make up around two thirds of professional roles (Croucher, 2023, p. 4).

Table 1: Gender

<i>Gender</i>	<i>%</i>
Female	67.9
Male	30.2
Non-binary	1.9

Table 2 shows the age breakdown of respondents. The average age for all respondents was 45.0 years. Female respondents tended to be marginally younger than male, reflecting a general trend in the higher education workforce (Croucher, 2023, p. 20); the average age in years for male respondents was 45.6 and for female respondents was 44.8.

Table 2: Age

<i>Age</i>	<i>%</i>
Under 35	7.7
35-44 years	50.0
45-54 years	23.1
55-64 years	17.3
65 years and over	1.9

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Discussion

Thematic analysis revealed four defining characteristics of the people who do the work of learning design—providing invaluable insights into who we are, what we do, and why we do it. First, we come from varied academic and professional backgrounds, holding a variety of educational qualifications. Second, our working conditions and organisational settings can vary greatly. Third, the knowledge, skills, and work practices of learning design are highly diverse and very contextualised. Fourth, despite the variety, a shared motivation and sense of purpose is shaping emergent professional identities. These themes and related sub-themes are elaborated in the following discussion, illustrated with quotations and examples from survey respondents. A broadly socio-material lens (Fenwick & Edwards, 2010; Fenwick et al., 2012, Latour, 2005) is applied to analyse learning design as a situated and relational practice, considering the interplay between the learning designer, the people they interact and collaborate with, the tools and technologies they use and advocate for, and the organisational settings and sectoral and social environments shaping their work practices, design decisions, and ultimately their contributions to student learning.

Our backgrounds

Learning designers come from varied academic and professional backgrounds and arrive in the field through diverse career pathways. We generally bring diverse work experiences into our roles—including from outside of the education and technology sectors. We also hold a range of formal qualifications across many academic disciplines—not just education.

Table 3 shows that we are a highly qualified profession. Most respondents hold a university-level qualification, and a majority a postgraduate qualification. 76.9% of respondents hold one or more university-level qualifications in the field of education, and 86.3% of those hold a postgraduate degree as their highest qualification.

Table 3: Educational qualification

Qualification level	%
Bachelor degree	13.7
Graduate certificate or diploma	9.9
Master degree	58.8
Doctoral degree	17.6

Table 4 shows that our qualifications are concentrated in the field of education, but that there is some diversity across disciplines. Many learning designers have a qualification from a field other than education as their highest qualification (but also hold a lower qualification in education), confirming that learning designers are transitioning into the field from earlier careers in other disciplines and professions.

Table 4: Field of education

Field	%
Education	60.9
Society and culture	11.8
Engineering and technology	7.8
Management and commerce	7.8
Creative arts and design	7.8
Health	3.9

Learning designers' professional backgrounds and career pathways generally reflect the core knowledge and skills of the profession: the majority come into learning design through earlier careers in education, technology, or multimedia production. Many have strong technical skills from years spent in information technology and multimedia production; for example, one respondent "worked in video production for 15

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years, taught briefly as a secondary science teacher, and then came to tertiary education.” Many have worked previously in education, including primary and secondary schools:

“I was a K-12 teacher and educational technology coach, enjoyed designing curriculum and learning materials and using technology, so that led eventually to learning design in higher education.”

“I studied teaching but worked in education program development for not-for-profits before moving into learning design in higher education.”

Many have held multiple and often diverse roles across different levels of education; one respondent worked as a secondary school teacher, ESL teacher, assistant principal, academic, and learning support officer for K-6 distance education, all before coming to learning design. Some also have significant leadership experience:

“I am an ex-high school Head of Department and Queensland Curriculum and Assessment Authority (QCAA) employee... I couldn't manage my work life balance anymore, put my family first and pivoted to a career where I could have all the educational fun and my life back! I had always preferred teaching the older grades anyway so adult education is great!”

Some respondents have transitioned into learning design via academia: “While studying a PhD in chemical engineering, I found a passion for educating adults. Via some time in learning and development, this led to my role at UTS now.” Other respondents came to the field after teaching and research careers in engineering, health, management, philosophy, creative writing, and visual arts. Others turned interests, experience, expertise, and careers in healthcare, nursing, psychology, publishing, hospitality, information science, and even aviation, into learning design roles. One respondent is a registered psychologist who has “worked in the training and development, workplace training, vocational education and training, and higher education sectors.” Another has “various degrees in health science” and “worked as a nurse and midwife” before developing an interest in education, teaching for a time, and transitioning into learning design. Another began in medical administration, managing a junior doctors education program. This may be a symptom of shifting job markets, people moving between roles and sectors more and more in the modern workforce. It might also be that the relative newness of the profession, coupled with the expansion of technology-enhanced and online learning, and the resultant demand created for learning designers in a variety of sectors, is attracting people from other fields. From a socio-material perspective, the diverse backgrounds of learning designers have several implications. A stronger background in pedagogy or technology shapes different design philosophies and work practices. Designers with backgrounds in specific disciplines might be more inclined to design learning experiences that mirror their own preferences, strengths, or the signature pedagogies of their disciplines. Further research could explore how these factors interact to shape the design decisions we make—and the professional community itself.

The levels of experience indicated by respondents suggests the expansion of the profession within the past ten or so years. Table 5 indicates that more than half of respondents have worked in learning design for less than 10 years.

Table 5: Experience

<i>Experience in years</i>	<i>%</i>
0-4 years	25.5
5-9 years	27.5
10-14 years	13.7
15-19 years	15.7
20+ years	17.6

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We have an experienced foundation of people in the field for 20 years or more, signifying a valuable core of seasoned professionals with accumulated knowledge. This experienced foundation is not simply a group of people; it's an assemblage of practitioners, their accumulated knowledge, the way they've applied and evolved this over time, and the influence this has on shaping both new learning designers and our professional community. But we are also a relatively young profession, with a steady influx of new professionals coming into the field due to a growing demand and surge of interest. We are a professional community that is still maturing its expertise and developing its identity. The influx of new professionals isn't just about knowledge and skills; they bring fresh perspectives shaped by their diverse backgrounds and the pedagogies and technologies they've encountered and applied in past careers and sectors. This constantly challenges and advances our practices, leading to the development of new design approaches and ways of working.

Our work settings

Job functions are proliferating. Working conditions and organisational settings can vary greatly. Most respondents (78.2%) work for public universities, and a small number for private universities (5.5%). There are also a growing number working outside of universities in the private sector (12.7%)—for edtech vendors, online program managers (OPMs), and other third-party educational service providers. 90.7% of respondents are currently working full-time, and, as Table 6 indicates, we are increasingly employed in continuing and permanent roles.

Table 6: Employment status

<i>Employment status</i>	<i>%</i>
Continuing / permanent	77.8
Fixed term	18.5
Casual / sessional	3.7

This demonstrates the growing stability of the field; organisations are increasingly looking for learning designers as permanent employees rather than relying on casual or short- and fixed-term contracts. More permanent positions signal that learning design is no longer seen as a temporary or peripheral function, but rather as a core organisational capability. A more permanent team ultimately has greater impact, allows for longer-term strategic planning, and can exert greater influence on shaping policies and practices of learning, teaching, and assessment in more systematic ways.

Within universities, our roles are generally split between centralised learning and teaching units and decentralised units in faculties, schools, and departments—although there currently seems to be a distinct trend towards centralisation:

“I work in a central learning and teaching unit that provides support and advice to faculty and teaching staff and works on learning and teaching projects across the university.”

“I work in a teaching and learning focussed research centre which provides a variety of support and professional development to other academics in the faculties.”

“A central team of education designers and education technologists within a larger central support team that includes digital support, media, academic development, and other academic supports for colleges and schools.”

Spreading out from these central units, we are cross-boundary professionals who contribute to institutional capacity building across sometimes siloed departments, schools, and faculties. We are also often unbounded professionals who contribute to broad-based projects and institutional development (Whitchurch, 2009). We contribute to, and are entangled in, complex networks of stakeholders and work units that include various

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re/combinations of the core functions of learning design, educational technology, educational media, and academic development:

“My immediate team is responsible for the professional development of academic staff to support their teaching responsibilities. The wider team consists of learning designers, learning

“I work in a team of Learning Designers. My larger unit encompasses four teams: Learning Designers, Learning Technology, Learning Media, and Educational Development.”

The core functions of learning design are generally split between roles, reflecting the depth of pedagogical knowledge and technical skills required in the post-digital university. The boundaries of what constitutes learning design expertise are fluid; specialisation in specific technologies, pedagogies, or methodologies is also becoming more and more valuable. This is also reflected in the proliferation and variation of job titles amongst people who do the work of learning design (Mitchell et al., 2017), indicating a lack of standardised practices, with different organisations requiring specific expertise based on their unique needs. Roles are also increasing in seniority, reflecting a broader trend in professional staff roles in Australian higher education over the past 40 years (Croucher, 2023, 19). This indicates the growth and maturity of the profession, as well as perhaps an acknowledgement within universities of the value and impact of learning design teams.

Our expertise

We conceptualise learning design differently based on our educational and professional backgrounds and current work contexts and organisational settings. Fundamentally, we are focused on designing learning through contributing to the combination and negotiation of different expertise between assorted stakeholders: “I bring the pedagogy (and sometime technology) to connect with the academics’ subject matter expertise.” One respondent succinctly writes: “I help very smart people become both easier for others to understand and fall more in love with their area of expertise.” This work requires a broad and diverse range of knowledge and skills. Respondents were asked to rank a list of capabilities from most to least important. As Table 7 demonstrates, knowledge and skills in pedagogy and design were generally rated more highly than technology skills.

Table 7: Knowledge and skills

Item	Ranking	Average	Median
Pedagogical models and strategies	1	4.55	4.0
Design methodologies, skills, and techniques	2	4.76	4.0
Assessment and evaluation	3	5.52	5.0
Consulting skills	4	5.57	4.0
Workshop facilitation	5	5.74	5.0
Creativity and creative thinking	6	5.76	6.0
Project management	7	6.71	7.0
EdTech and LMS skills	8	7.55	8.0
Content creation, including media production	9	7.69	8.0
Instructional writing	10	8.90	10.0
Training and development	11	9.31	10.0
Coding and other technical skills	12	10.12	11.0
Budgeting and resource allocation	13	10.26	12.0

Additional items cited include networking and relationship building, stakeholder management, collaboration and teamwork, leadership, and research skills. One respondent considered the “mental flexibility to move between ideas” a core skill, and another added situational awareness and adaptability, “applying knowledge flexibly to a changing and often constrained context.” How we use these skills often depends on our work contexts and organisational settings. Some of us work on ad hoc projects while others are embedded in more

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constant and permanent university systems. In either case, our core work involves providing “various types of support to academics for their teaching and learning”. Much of our everyday work still involves technology support, such as building courses, LMS set-up and administration, and troubleshooting. We respond to IT support requests and “answer emails for professors who need assistance with LMS or other related topics”. Providing support, developing resources, and delivering training for faculty are important aspects of our work:

“My role is to develop the teaching skills of academic staff at my institution. This includes developing and delivering professional development workshops, supporting student feedback processes, and developing resources to support teaching practices.”

But our work cannot be reduced to technology training and support—our pedagogical and design expertise is broad and deep. We “conduct consultations and provide tailored support and advice for faculty”, typically either through 1:1 consultations or collaborative workshop facilitation. This requires highly developed analytical and critical thinking skills to analyse students’ learning needs and the broader educational context, coupled with broad and deep pedagogical knowledge to recommend and implement effective evidence-based and research-informed solutions. We use highly developed research skills to ensure we are informed about “research topics related to inquiries by faculty or emerging topics”, staying current and up-to-date trends and innovations in pedagogy and technology. We are influencers and leaders of best-practice and innovation in pedagogy and technology, and our work often extends to managing and leading strategic initiatives in learning and teaching. We are increasingly in management and leadership positions, requiring more complex skills in stakeholder management, resource allocation, budgeting, and more. Our work also increasingly involves working with senior staff to “support the quality, policy and governance required for all aspects of education in the university.” But above all, learning designers act as translators, bridging the gap between faculty expertise, student needs, evidence-based pedagogies, and technological affordances. This multifaceted role requires us to be flexible and adaptable, drawing on a highly diverse knowledge base and skill set to ensure we continue to provide effective support in a complex and constantly changing field.

Our identities

A shared motivation and sense of purpose is shaping our emergent professional identities, transcending the boundaries of our diverse roles and backgrounds. Professional identity is “not a stable entity”, but a complex process of individual and collective *becoming* “shaped by contextual factors” such as knowledge and skills, working conditions and organisational settings, and broader trends in the sector and society (Clarke et al., 2013, p. 8). We are blended ‘third space’ professionals who straddle both professional and academic domains, and we “capitalise on a sense of ‘belonging’ and ‘not belonging’ entirely to either” (Whitchurch, 2009, p. 408) to drive quality and innovation in teaching, learning and assessment. Ours is a people-focused profession, motivated by improving student learning, achieved by building strong collaborative working relationships with faculty and other stakeholders. We are motivated by “positive feedback from students” and feel rewarded when we can see “the outcome of our advice, in a finished product, student outcomes and engagement, or a satisfied academic”. This is how we know we are “impacting the quality of teaching and that students will have a better experience because of the work [we] do”. Our purpose stems from “knowing that [we] can help students have a better, less stressful and more inclusive university experience.” The desire to improve student learning isn’t solely a personal drive; It is shaped by working relationships with faculty, positive student feedback, the affordances of educational technologies, and organisational settings. The university itself, with its structures and cultures, influences the pursuit of this shared purpose in one way or another. One respondent describes the most rewarding part of their work as finding meaning and being valued: “[I feel rewarded] when I have something meaningful to do, such as facilitate a workshop, explore a deep dive area, mock up site designs for others to follow or incorporate, seeing good solid practical pedagogy in action, when lecturers listen.” Another respondent feels rewarded by “working with academics on longer term, and more involved, projects... which challenges and engages the educator—and gets them excited—and then seeing the work pay off in student engagement and performance.” This focus on shared purpose transcends individual roles, highlighting the socio-material entanglement of work practices and professional identities. We

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contribute to making tangible improvements in student learning through the ways we work within and across this intricate web of social and material influences, capitalising on our unique ‘third space’ boundary-crossing position to foster quality and innovation through advocacy, influence, collaboration, and leadership.

Conclusion

Diversity and adaptability are our superpowers. Our different educational, professional, and disciplinary backgrounds, our divergent work functions, team structures, organisational settings, and our diverse knowledge and skills—these all create complex professional identities. But this diversity also empowers us to more confidently navigate the socio-material entanglements that shape teaching, learning, and assessment in the contemporary post-digital university. By providing this snapshot of the people who do the work of learning design, this research begins to quantify and legitimise our impact, clarifying our specific activities and contributions to various aspects of post-digital education, potentially leading to increased recognition and appreciation of our roles and expertise. It empowers us to advocate for our work and its value more effectively, while also contributing to the broader body of knowledge about the changing role of professional staff in higher education and informing best practices for supporting this work. It potentially informs decisions related to work structures and workflows, staffing and resource allocation for learning designers and other ‘third space’ professionals. It also informs the design and development of crucial professional resources such as standards, organisations, and training programs. Future research is needed to more fully elaborate learning designers’ perspectives on their specific contributions to quality and innovation in teaching and learning, including how specific individual and collective characteristics influence our design philosophies, approaches, and decisions in different ways.

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