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Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

THRIVE: A purpose-led portfolio-based approach to professional learning for novice learning designers

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Learning is a core competency for learning designers, but formal training and development often still presents a challenge—especially for novice learning designers. This paper reports on the initial stages of a design-based research project to conceptualise a purpose-led portfolio-based training program, based on cognitive apprenticeship principles, that cultivates in novice learning designers the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and values necessary to be effective in their current roles and future careers. The evidence-based, research-informed THRIVE framework is described, alongside how it shapes specific elements of the planned portfolio. The conceptualisation of the portfolio and supporting training program focuses on ‘purpose’ as a response to changing employee needs and motivations in the modern workplace, while also preparing learning designers to thrive in their work. This has implications for how we design and deliver professional learning for learning designers, as well as deepening our understanding of employee motivation and engagement in the field.

Keywords: learning design, portfolios, professional learning, purpose learning

Introduction

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to either *what* or *how* learning designers should learn. Learning designers often fall into the field from a variety of educational and professional backgrounds, and this presents specific challenges for their ongoing professional learning. How do we provide effective guidance in the knowledge, skills, and mindsets necessary to succeed in the field? Novice learning designers require deep and structured training across a range of topics from teaching, learning and assessment to educational technologies and learning management systems, learning analytics, instructional writing, content creation, multimedia production, design methodologies and techniques, consulting and stakeholder management, project management, communication, teamwork, and more. Novices often face challenges translating theoretical knowledge into practical applications, and traditional professional learning models do not adequately bridge this gap, leaving them unprepared for the breadth and depth of real-world design scenarios and future work contexts—let alone confident in their professional identities or career purposes. Moving beyond competency, this requires a professional learning model that focuses not only on knowledge acquisition and skills development, but also on mindsets, values, and purpose. It requires a model that promotes not just learning but vitality, creating the conditions in which novices can *thrive*.

Responding to this challenge, this paper describes a design-based research project exploring the conceptualisation and design of a purpose-led portfolio-based training program that cultivates the knowledge, skills, mindsets, and values that novice learning designers need to be effective in their current roles and future careers. First, it discusses the rise of learning design as a profession and the growing research interest in the field, particularly the increasing focus on professional learning for learning designers—*what* but also *how* learning designers should learn. Second, it outlines our design-based research process, analysing the learning needs of the current cohort and describing the existing training program within which the portfolio will be situated. Third, it describes the first iteration of the evidence-based, research-informed THRIVE framework, created after an extensive literature review, to guide the design of the portfolio, and discusses how these theoretical principles are materialised through key components of the work-in-progress portfolio. The planned portfolio comprises an impact statement, reflection points, and accompanying digital artefacts, and is

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

supported by structured mentoring and coaching discussions about meaningful work. Responding to changing employee needs in the modern workplace, the portfolio is driven by the question of *purpose*, and making connections to personal meaning, creating the conditions in which novices can *thrive*. Design-based research allows us to test our assumptions about the need for a focus on purpose and gives us an opportunity to review the impact in context as novice learning designers move through the training program. The paper concludes by reflecting on what we have learned through this design-based research process for our next iteration of the portfolio, as well as the implications of this research for how we conceptualise, design, and deliver professional learning for learning designers.

Background

Learning design is a growing profession. Learning designers are in high demand in higher education, as well as 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 field of learning design are expected to increase by 21.7% globally (SEEK, 2024). In higher education, the rise of learning designers and other 'third space' professionals (Whitchurch, 2012) is due in part to several factors, including the massive growth of technology-enhanced and online learning in the post-digital university, the continuing professionalisation of learning and teaching and an increasing focus on contentious questions of 'quality', and the unbundling and disaggregation of academic roles (Tucker & Neely, 2010; Macfarlane, 2011) caused by the need for specialised expertise in pedagogy, technology, and other areas generally beyond the scope of academic expertise alone. New employees transition into these roles, often at entry-level positions, from diverse educational and professional backgrounds, with varying knowledge bases and skill sets, taking a variety of career pathways (Sage & Sankey, 2021). This all presents some specific challenges for the design and delivery of professional learning for learning designers.

There is a growing body of research on learning design as a practice and profession. Alongside the emergence of new formal degree programs, short courses, and micro-credentials in learning design and related domains, new research explores several approaches to formal and informal professional learning from different vantage points. Altena et al. (2019) investigate the professional identities of learning designers, including the knowledge, skills and attributes required. Lowell & Moore (2020) discuss the importance of authentic learning and real-world activities in developing knowledge and skills as a learning designer. MacCullum & Brown (2022) describe the development of a micro-credential for learning designers, declaring that we should broaden our perspective and extend our thinking beyond just professional standards and employer requirements. Heggart & Dickson-Deane (2022) describe the development of the Graduate Certificate of Learning Design offered by the University of Technology Sydney, noting the current "opportunity for learning designers and academics who deliver learning design content to define what it means to be a learning designer" (p. 281), suggesting that "there has been little attention paid to the work done by learning designers in the field and that has led to a requisite lack of theorising about the best ways of training and developing learning designers" (p. 283). Mitchell & Bugden (2023) describe an 'ecosystem' for conceptualising professional learning to support learning designers at different stages of their careers, identifying the importance of elements such as informal learning in situ, mentoring, professional networks, and reflective practice. Abblitt et al. (2023) describe the co-design of a training program for novice learning designers, describing a model for how learning designers learn in the flow of work based on principles of agency and autonomy, situated learning and immersion in practice, mentoring and coaching, and participation in communities of practice. Most recently, Pingo et al. (2024) propose a framework to guide and support learning designers to reflect on their knowledge and skills, identify gaps, and plan how to address these through professional learning, workplace learning, and networking. The need for such evidence-based, research-informed approaches to both *what* and *how* learning designers should learn only becomes more and more vital as the field continues to grow.

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

While the professional learning landscape for learning designers evolves, there is also a growing body of research suggesting a strong and emerging desire from employees for a renewed sense of meaning and purpose in the modern workplace—for meaningful interactions, not just transactions (Gallup, 2019, 2024; Gast, 2020; McKinsey, 2021). McKinsey's 2021 report *The search for purpose at work* outlines lessons learned in the post-COVID work environment, claiming that employees do indeed want a renewed and revised sense of purpose at work. More recently, Gallup's 2024 *State of the global workplace report: From suffering to thriving* discusses how meaningful discussions with managers directly influence work performance and well-being. Research on 'meaning at work' (i.e., Rosso et al., 2010; Van den Broek et al., 2021) highlights a strong connection between an individual's sense of self and their motivation at work. Research also shows that thriving at work can be achieved by activating vitality, through specific work behaviours such as focusing on individual strengths, enabling employee agency, and facilitating heedful relationships (Moore et al., 2021; Kleine et al., 2022; Spreitzer et al., 2005). The THRIVE framework described below was developed in the context of these emerging needs and in response to an organisation's responsibility for preparing young employees not only for their current roles but for the future of work.

Method

Our research approaches these crucial topics with two central questions in mind. First, what are the theoretical foundations of a training program for learning designers? What are the design elements necessary to support these? Second, how do a sense of purpose and career satisfaction influence professional learning for learning designers, creating the conditions in which they can thrive? How should our understanding of these aspects inform our portfolio design? Ultimately, we aim to better understand what makes a successful learning designer, as well as how to design professional learning opportunities that foster these qualities.

Beginning to investigate these questions, we adopted a practice-led approach (Hawkins & Wilson, 2017; Mäkelä, 2007; Smith & Dean, 2009) while also drawing on aspects of design-based research (Barab & Squire, 2004; The Design-Based Research Collective, 2003). Ethics is often complex in design-based and practice-led research; in this instance, ethics approval and informed consent were not required as the only human participants involved are the researchers themselves. Adopting a design-based research methodology, the researchers shape the portfolio and training program as informed experts with the intention of testing and refining the design based on principles that were derived from prior research and experience (Armstrong et al., 2020). Our collaborative learning design practice provides us a framework and context within which to explore these complex questions, engineer potential forms of learning and to apply research methods that are iterative and moulded by context. This allows us to generate new knowledge about the influence of aspects such as motivation, engagement, purpose, and thriving in professional learning, before then refining our design. Having defined the problem, explored the research, and grounded our solution in theory, we are now able to construct, trial, and then iterate the model—noting that the design-based research process is necessarily incomplete, messy and iterative. Guided by constant reflection on practice—*on* action and *in* action (Schön, 1992)—our findings can inform our next steps and continuing professional practice as we then move into evaluation of the initial design and further iteration of the approach and framework.

The researchers are part of a large team of approximately 50 learning designers working for an online program management (OPM) company partnered with over a dozen public and private universities across Australia and South-East Asia. Both of our roles involve providing training, mentoring, and coaching for a small group of novice learning designers. The designers are a diverse group, usually keen to build careers in a specific field and with, on average, less than 10 years of experience in the workforce. They often bring specialist skills from previous roles that can include primary and secondary education, academia, technology, media production, game design, customer service, publishing, and more. Many bring with them a background in teaching and learning—having been teachers, tutors, trainers, or lecturers—while others have limited educational experience but come with a passion to learn more about the field.

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Any training program needs to accommodate both the diversity of this cohort and the fast-changing field of learning design itself. Elements of the current existing training program (Abblitt et al., 2023) include a series of self-paced micro-credentials co-designed by the group of novice designers, immersing them in the learning design process while also generating training for the future program; opportunities to ‘shadow’ more senior learning designers, exposing novices to the situated methods and practices in different educational and design contexts; and a support network of approachable ‘trusted advisors’ who act to provide fast feedback and quick solutions based on deeper experience of the role when hurdles or skills gaps are faced. The newest element of the program is a purpose-led portfolio which stretches across, and integrates, these other elements. The planned portfolio—including its theoretical framework and key design elements—is described below.

Discussion

The purpose-led portfolio began as a response to Stanford2025’s purpose learning model. This is a student-centred approach that prioritises lifelong learning through real-world impact. Students define their own missions (rather than selecting a major), and then guide their coursework and experiences towards addressing real-world challenges and achieving their mission. This fosters in graduates a sense of purpose and a lifelong commitment to positive change.

From this initial spark, we undertook a comprehensive literature review to support and test our assumptions as informed experts. This is the analysis and exploration stage of design-based research. From this we conceived a purpose-led portfolio that would create confident and effective learning designers while also improving motivation for and engagement in professional learning. We then moved into the design and construction phase of the design-based research process, developing the THRIVE framework (Figure 1) and a series of related design elements to make it a reality. Driven by overall questions of purpose and impact, the framework comprises six guiding theoretical principles and several related design elements and is shaped by cognitive apprenticeship principles including modelling, coaching, scaffolding, articulation, reflection and exploration. Additionally, the framework strongly focuses on purpose, values, and impact. This is in response to research by bodies such as Gallup and McKinsey who describe the changing expectations, needs, and motivations of the modern workforce. An important over-arching aim of the program is to improve well-being and motivation for novice learning designers who work in a high-speed, knowledge-based, ever-evolving profession. This comprehensive approach, emphasising both skill development and purpose, directly targets the essential elements of thriving at work: vitality sustained by well-being and learning fuelled by a renewed sense of purpose.

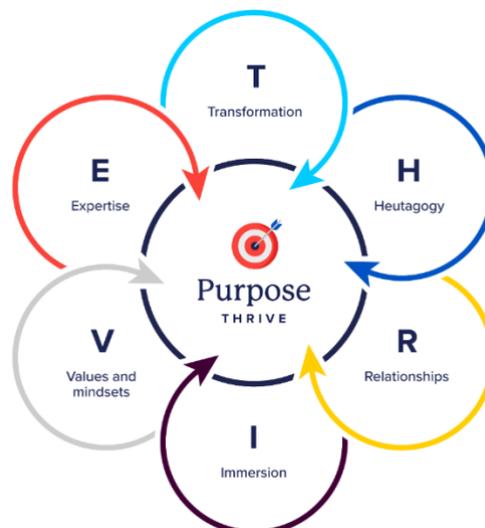


Figure 1. The THRIVE framework

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

The framework looks beyond just job satisfaction to questions of *thriving*. Thriving has two elements, threaded throughout the framework. The first is *vitality*, feeling energised, enthusiastic, and passionate about work, and having the drive and motivation to take on challenges. The second is *learning*, the sense that you are constantly growing and developing, acquiring new knowledge and skills, shifting perspectives, and changing mindsets, feeling like you are not stagnating, and having opportunities to improve yourself professionally. The table below summarises the six elements of the THRIVE framework, the theoretical research behind these, and the design elements which work to materialise these in the portfolio and supporting training program.

Table 1

The THRIVE framework

<i>Principle</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Research</i>	<i>Design elements</i>
Transformation	Transformative learning is all about a fundamental shift in the way students understand themselves and the world—through shifted perspectives, re-evaluated beliefs, empowerment, and by taking action—action driven by reflection—action on how to create meaningful impact.	Purpose learning (Stanford2025) Threshold concepts (Meyer & Land, 2003, 2005) Transformative learning (Mezirow, 1991, 1997). Value creation (Wenger-Trayner & Wenger-Trayner, 2020)	Verb Impact statement and activities Semi-structured conversations with Manager
Heutagogy	Extending theories of andragogy and adult learning, heutagogy encourages students to build connections across networks of knowledge and people, developing critical skills in metacognition and self-regulation, as well as autonomy and responsibility.	Andragogy and adult learning (Knowles et al., 2014; Merriam et al., 2007) Connectivism (Siemens, 2005; Downes, 2022) Heutagogy (Blaschke, 2012; Blaschke & Hase, 2015) Metacognition and self-regulation (Winne, 2018)	Self-guided training plan Prompts for goal setting and reflection
Relationships	An apprenticeship model emphasises learning by doing, connecting with, and learning from mentors and ‘trusted advisors’ through a structured process of observation and modelling, scaffolded design tasks, contextualised practice, and critical reflection.	Apprenticeship model (Mancilla & Frey, 2020) Cognitive apprenticeship model (Collins et al., 1989; Dennen & Burner, 2007) Mentoring and coaching (Stefaniak, 2017) Trusted advisors (Maister et al., 2012)	Shadowing and co-design projects Mentoring and coaching framework Meaningful conversations with managers, peers, and trusted advisors

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

Immersion	Learning is situated within professional contexts and communities through hands-on immersion allows theoretical knowledge and practical skills to be learned simultaneously and integrated in situ.	Experiential learning (Kolb, 1984) Informal learning in situ (Mitchell & Bugden, 2023) Integrating theory and practice (Kolb, 1984; Wrenn & Wrenn, 2009) Situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998)	Shadowing and co-design projects Observation and consultation rubrics Readiness levels assessments Reflective checklists
Values and mindsets	Rather than just knowledge and skills, a 'lifeworld' perspective emphasises how practices shape our fundamental 'ways of being'—our ontologies, mindsets, and values—and how experience shape our professional identities.	Lifeworld perspective (Dall'Alba & Barnacle, 2007; Dall'Alba, 2009; Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2010) Reflective practice (Brookfield, 1995; Schön, 1992) Ways of knowing, doing, and being (Barnett & Coate, 2004) Value creation (Wenger-Trayner & Wener-Trayner, 2020)	Impact statement and activities Structured reflective tasks
Expertise	The transition from novice to expert is achieved by recognising the limitations of current knowledge and skills and then iteratively receiving personalised guidance and support to bridge the gap towards expertise.	Mastery learning (Bloom, 1971) Novice to expert skills acquisition (Dreyfus, 2004; Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980) Zone of proximal development (Vygotsky, 1978)	Syllabus Micro-credentials Capability framework Self-assessment tool

The purpose-led portfolio foregrounds student-centeredness and agency, supporting self-directed professional learning (Daunert et al., 2014). Students begin by identifying a verb and writing an impact statement. This helps novices to articulate their motivation and purpose as a learning designer, and to imagine the learning designer they wish to become. This statement guides learning and is reevaluated and revised as students first find and then develop their sense of purpose. By fostering this purpose-driven approach, the program cultivates a foundation for thriving in a fast-paced modern workplace, where a strong sense of vitality emerges from personal agency and learning is driven by a clearly defined purpose and desired impact.

Students apply metacognitive skills to self-assess their learning needs and use the portfolio to set goals, gather evidence, monitor progress, and reflect on current and future learning (Bokser et al., 2016; Huang et al., 2012). They are supported by a capability framework and self-assessment tool, as well as semi-structured but self-guided and self-paced training plans. Students move through a scaffolded design process, developing a range of artefacts and receiving feedback from mentors, peers, and trusted advisors. They create, collect, and curate authentic digital artefacts and exemplars, and are challenged to make links between these artefacts and reflections on their current work to guide their future work (Lam, 2024). This also helps to assess current capabilities and areas for development with guidance from managers and mentors. Guidance is reduced as students demonstrate increasing mastery. Through this structured yet self-directed approach, the program fosters the vitality of self-driven learning and continuous self-assessment and reflection.

ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

A mentoring and coaching framework supports students through regular discussions with managers and mentors about learning needs, growth, and meaningful work. Students use observation and consultation rubrics, readiness levels assessments and reflective checklists to 'shadow' and observe senior colleagues in a variety of design contexts. They work alongside others on co-design projects for immersion in the situated real-world practices of learning design. Students participate in structured reflective tasks and cognitive apprenticeship, investigating what more experienced and senior learning designers think and do. Cultivating a supportive learning community that fosters self-reflection, collaboration, and meaningful connections increases understanding of self and others and enables novices to reflect critically on their learning and professional practice (Roberts, 2018; Slepcevic-Zach & Stock, 2018). This also helps to integrate learning and promotes meaning making and the development and pursuit of purpose (Buyarski et al., 2015), shaping emergent professional identities (Carter, 2021; Graves et al., 2011). This empowers novices to identify the mindsets that help them succeed as they reflect on, and develop their own picture of, the designer they wish to become. This also informs the development and revision of their individual impact statement.

Conclusion

Good learning designers require deep commitment and a sense of purpose to carry them through the complexities and ambiguities of a field that is constantly shifting and evolving, and that is shaped and reshaped by new and emerging pedagogies and technologies. The development of confident, knowledgeable, skilled, and thoughtful learning design professionals—learning designers who are genuinely set up for success—cannot just focus on knowledge acquisition and skill development. If that is all it is, novice learning designers are being set up to fail. They need a work environment that promotes not just learning but vitality—in a word, *thriving*. The THRIVE framework was born out of a comprehensive literature review that further guides the informed experts who designed the program. It relies heavily on cognitive apprenticeship principles, with the purpose-driven portfolio offering a novel approach to professional learning, making a significant contribution to advancing research and practice on how learning designers should learn. This research hopes to offer a starting point that may inform the design and development of future professional learning programs for learning designers and other 'third space' professionals as well as to encourage further reflection, conversations, and research about what and how learning designers should learn. This also has potential applications for supporting career development and programmatic assessment for students in higher education. Our next steps in the design-based research are the implementation and evaluation of the portfolio to help quantify the influence of purpose learning on motivation and engagement, and to test the conceptual validity of 'thriving' as an enabler for productive and meaningful professional learning.

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ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

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ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

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ASCILITE 2024

Navigating the Terrain:

Emerging Frontiers in Learning Spaces, Pedagogies, and Technologies

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