



Reconnecting with ourselves? Developing standards and competencies for Learning Designers

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This symposium will explore the opportunities, function and context of professional standards, competencies and frameworks that apply to Learning Designer roles in Higher Education. We seek to sharpen the focus and remove some ambiguity around Learning Designer roles. In the symposium, participants will consider the challenges, barriers, as well as the opportunities that professional standards for learning designers may afford, through examining the role from a professional identity lens. The symposium is designed to be an active forum where participants will discuss and contemplate what an Australian standard for Learning Designers may look like.

Keywords: Learning Designers, Learning Technologist, Third Space workers, professional standards, competencies, frameworks.

Introduction

Considerable ambiguity surrounds the role of learning designers as third space workers in Higher Education (Smith et al., 2021, Altena et al., 2019). The scope and focus of the profession are often misunderstood by the institutions hiring learning designers and to some degree, how learning designers understand themselves and their roles. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the Learning Designer role was recognised and highly valued as having the skillset required for helping institutions and academic staff ensure the continuity of student learning through the rapid pivot to remote learning (Bellaby et al., 2020). Examining the nature of these roles and how they have changed in response to COVID-19 has received renewed focus in literature in recent years (Bellaby et al., 2020; Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2021).

However, even in the pre-pandemic literature, the evolving role of learning designers highlighted the need for learning designers to be agile, responsive to emerging trends, and prepared for shifts in the focus and scope of their role (Halupa, 2019; Obexer & Giardina, 2016; Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2015). Other scholars highlight the need for learning designers to develop ‘designer resiliency’, which is not defined by the complexity of the role but the ongoing challenges that come with the role in an ever-changing field (Stefaniak et al., 2018). Yanchar and Hawkley (2014) observe that “instructional designers contribute something unique to the design process”, beyond the application of knowledge. However, while there is a strong focus in the literature around the aspirational attributes of a learning designer, there is a lack of research into the specific knowledge or skills that are necessary for the role. Dall’Alba (2009) comments that learning to become a professional involves integration of knowing, acting, and ways of being “that unfold over time”. More recently Heggart and Dickson-Deane (2021) suggest that with the pandemic, there is an opportunity for learning designers who are now critically involved in the delivery and design of student learning to define what it means to be a learning designer. One way to approach this is through the development of core competencies, standards and/or frameworks that describes the work of a learning designer.

Learning Designer competencies, standards or a framework

Countries such as the US and Canada have long established competency frameworks for those third space workers in learning designer roles. The International Board of Standards for Training, Performance, and Instruction (IBSTPI) is a not-for-profit that develops, validates, publishes, and disseminates standards, competencies, and performance statements for several areas including instructors, training managers, instructional designers, and evaluators (Koszalka et al., 2013). However, Park and Luo (2017) call for the need to adapt the more corporate-focused IBSTPI standard to suit the higher education context. Other relevant competencies and standards for similar roles include the ACET standards (2012), and the Canadian Education

Developers Portfolio (2017) classification for knowing, doing and being aspects across entry level, intermediate and advanced levels of career progression. Although useful, the question remains whether these frameworks adequately represent the full extent of what learning designers need to know, do and be to be effective in the Australasian higher education context.

A recent survey conducted for an upcoming publication on the work of Australasian Learning Designers, indicated that 66 percent of learning designers were supportive of developing minimum competency standards for learning designer roles. The symposium will consider if developing minimum competency standards would remove some of the ambiguity surrounding this important role in higher educational institutions, and also to take a step towards professionalising the role. Some of the questions the panel will explore include: what would a set of competencies, guidelines or standards look like for the Australasian context? If such standards exist, how will they be useful in helping institutions understand the role of learning designers and their career pathways? If not standards, then what is needed to move the profession forward?

Participants will have the opportunity to reflect on their own professional identity and takeaway an understanding of the considerations and perspectives involved in moving the profession forward.

Symposium structure and participatory panel

This symposium will have four distinct parts:

1. Overview

A brief overview of US and Canadian existing competency standards or frameworks for Learning Designer roles will be provided to orientate symposium participants to what other countries have established and recent research findings regarding learning designer perspectives on establishing professional standards.

2. Facilitated Panel Discussion

The facilitators will pose a series of discussion questions to a panel of experts representing diverse perspectives including learning designers, academics, and senior management. This panel will bring diverse roles, experiences, and institutional perspectives to the discussion. The panel will consider the benefits, caveats and challenges there might be in establishing a set of Australian standards and what their purpose may be in: a) understanding the role of learning designers b) impacting the professional identity of the role. Symposium participants will be encouraged to make comments via the facilitated backchannel.

3. The Audience decides

Participants will be invited to vote on whether they are in favour or not of professional standards of learning designers. Based on their votes, they will either participate in a brainstorming session on possible core standards or consider the question if not standards then what is needed to professionalise the role.

4. Symposium summary, close and next steps

The facilitators will wrap up at the end, drawing together the discussion themes and proposing next steps.

Panel membership

The following participants have been invited to participate in this panel discussion to ensure that a diversity of perspectives are represented:

1. **Sharon Altena**, is Senior Curriculum and Learning Designer at Queensland University of Technology. She brings to the panel over 20 years' experience in the field of learning design across the VET and University sectors in Australia. Sharon is a Senior Fellow of the HEA and a PhD Candidate at Griffith University. Sharon is also undertaking a large-scale research project with colleagues from the University of Wollongong and University of Melbourne, which is seeking to explore the role, identity and work of learning designers working

in the third space.

2. **Dr Rachel Fitzgerald**, is the Deputy Associate Dean (Academic) for the BEL Faculty at the University of Queensland and the Director of Online Education, at the Business School. Rachel has led a range of learning design projects and teams in Australia, the UK and Ireland. In 2019, as Senior Lecturer in Learning Design, Rachel led the development of the Graduate Certificate in Learning Design for QUT Online. Rachel has switched between professional and academic learning design roles and discipline academic roles and brings a particular perspective to this discussion.

3. **Aves Parsemain**, is an educational developer at the University of New South Wales. They have twelve years of experience in higher education, both as academic and professional staff. They have worked in educational design and academic development since 2018, helping academics design courses and enhance their educational practice. Aves is passionate about creating fun and inclusive learning environments where all students feel engaged, supported and safe.

4. **Annabel Orchard**, is a Senior Learning Designer at the University of Melbourne. She has worked in Australian universities since 2000 in various roles, including Tutor, Lecturer, Subject Coordinator, Program Convenor, Researcher, Research Centre Administrator, E-Learning Coordinator, Educational Designer and occasional voice-over artist - but not, to date, Chancellor.

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