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Diverse people, diverse pathways: Exploring a professional development ecosystem for Learning Designers

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Learning design as a profession has seen increased visibility and recruitment within Higher Education through the pandemic and beyond. However, there are known challenges for those transitioning to learning design in entering what is a heavily specialised field, and challenges for universities in recruiting and retaining quality Learning Designers, understanding the roles and skills needed, and ensuring the consistency and quality of learning design across the sector. We argue that a holistic approach to recruiting, developing and supporting these roles in practice is needed. To further conversations around Learning Designer professional development specifically, we offer an ‘ecosystem’ for conceptualising professional development and supporting Learning Designers at different stages of their journey.

Keywords: learning designer, learning design, third space, professional development, Higher Education

Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought a number of challenges and opportunities for Higher Education (HE). Third space roles such as Learning Designers (LDs), have been integral to supporting the rapid changes to teaching and learning caused by the pandemic and other large-scale shifts in the sector (Baré, et al., 2021; Bellaby & Sankey, 2020).

Despite this, LDs also face challenges and obstacles while working in the sector. The role is often ill-defined (Mitchell, et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2021) and difficult to recruit for and retain (Slade et al., 2019). LDs, due to misunderstandings of the role and overlapping aspects of their role with other roles, are in contested space (Mitchell et al., 2017; Simpson et al., 2021) and may suffer from limitations in career progression and morale as a result. This raises questions regarding HE’s ability to retain these knowledge workers, and what strategies may support professional development, professional visibility and progression pathways for LDs over the long term.

There are additional challenges related to quality and maturity of learning design. Learning design activity within institutions is often ad-hoc and siloed (Mihai, 2023), or even remedial, reactive or immature (Mihai, 2023; Mosley, 2023). Work may range from “rudimentary technical support” (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020) to more creative work, to pastoral care, but with recognition that in some instances LDs may be undertaking work that is not meaningful design work (Bellaby & Sankey, 2020; Mosley, 2023). Such challenges limit both LDs progression in their field but also an institution’s and the HE sector’s ability to develop high quality and innovative online learning. Professional development for LDs therefore needs to be a key focus for institutions: to solve challenges in recruiting for the work, retaining talent, supporting quality in unit and course design for the institution, and ensuring maturation of the field across the sector.

There is an opportunity to consider the future of learning design in the context of skills, professional identity and the work that LDs could do. Our intention is that by discussing professional development we can begin a conversation as to how professional development supports and aligns to skills, progression pathways and professional identity, as part of a more holistic conception of learning design as a professional field. This paper offers a professional development ‘ecosystem’ to support LDs, based on research literature and our own experience.

Learning Designer professional development career stages

When discussing professional development and progression for LDs and developing our professional development ecosystem, we have considered learning design experience at different levels or stages of the

career journey.

When investigating entry and transition into the field, Sage and Sankey (2021) surveyed Australian LDs and found “Close to 20% of position holders declared up to 2 years of experience on the job, nearly 40% up to 5, and over 70% no more than 10 years, while the remaining nearly 30% are veterans, with at least 10 years of experience” (p. 24). Yanchar & Hawkley (2014) and Mosley (2022) likewise discuss LDs via career or experience category terms such as “novice”, and “experienced practitioner” (Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014) or “expert” (Mosley, 2022). These would suggest that LDs go through key stages in their career development, and that skillsets and support needs change depending on career stage. We further discuss professional development needs based on these loose categorisations.

Entry to novice

LDs typically transition into the role from a previous career in another field (Sage & Sankey, 2021), often education or media. Sage & Sankey (2021) also note potential relative difficulty in breaking into HE learning design, without significant prior educational experience. This suggestion is supported by Slade et al. (2019) who note it is difficult to acquire these roles in HE without prior qualifications; as even entry level roles are classified at professional Higher Education Worker (HEW) 5 level, there is an expectation of minimum expertise.

Sage & Sankey (2021) indicated that entry into the field was based on or could be facilitated through a mix of:

- Qualification and educational background – an education degree, typically at a postgraduate level
- Relevant experience – typically in education or media, or other tertiary education specialisations
- Demonstrable knowledge around pedagogy and learning design, gained through experiences in the field but may also be developed through mentoring and/or accessing fellow LDs as a critical friend
- Building and demonstrating direct and transferrable skills such as through a portfolio and connecting relevant experiences within job interviews
- Remaining up to date through attending and regularly logging professional development.

While relatively recent in Australia, formal qualification programs in learning design exist and are another avenue for gaining relevant skills and knowledge, while noting that these may have limitations. Some may not sufficiently prepare or support LDs to gain real-world skills (Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014; Mosley, 2023) and further work to evaluate these is needed.

Many LDs have transitioned into HE learning design from OPMs (private Online Program Management companies who partner with Universities to offer online learning degrees, such as Keypath, OES or Curio) or from other HE roles (such as academic lecturing/tutoring, English Language teaching or Academic Skills), anecdotally suggesting that institutions also value LDs with HE specific experience and OPMs may in some ways act as a pipeline to universities and as an entry level learning design apprenticeship.

Novice to expert

Most LDs typically sit within a range of HEW 5/6 to HEW 8 professional roles (Slade et al., 2019), however, Mitchell et al. (2017) and our own experiences suggest the range is not always indicative of a progression from novice to expert roles in practice – delineations and classifications of roles will differ across institutions, and level of experience or maturity of LDs within these role titles and levels may vary.

While Yanchar & Hawkley (2014) note the gaps in the literature around how LDs gain skills and knowledge and professional maturity in their field, the following are suggested across the literature.

Informal learning in situ:

The important role of “everyday, informal learning” (Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014, p. 272) as self-guided, unstructured practice or as learning in situ (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022) related to completing projects and refining skills, typically undertaken on the job or within authentic settings. LDs require opportunities for “innovative learning” developing new knowledge, problem solving in ways that result in learning) and for developing “designer judgement” (Yanchar & Hawkley, 2014) gained over time through a diverse range of experiences. Conversely, this may mean that LDs who are limited in their role and scope (Mosley, 2022) or situated in institutions with low learning design maturity (Mosley, 2023) are provided with limited opportunities to build designer judgement and to mature their practice.

Mentoring:

Utilising the role of experienced LDs as mentors, calling on practical wisdom of experts to support novices (Yanchar & Hawkey, 2014), or through shadowing or working with expert LDs, novices are exposed to how experts utilise, repurpose, and deliberately choose to not use a range of instructional design frameworks to solve various ill-structured problems (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022; Mosley, 2022). Mentoring can also potentially support a range of other functions, from exposing novices to diverse problems and experiences, and inducting LDs into a community. However, we note that access to and quality of mentors within an institution will be dependent on where the learning design role is placed within the institution and organisational hierarchy, and the skill sets and experiences of relevant mentors.

Networks outside the institution:

Collaborations and professional groups outside of the institution, and/or Virtual Communities of Practices (vCoPs) allow LDs to connect and learn from others more broadly (Bickle et al., 2021), or fill gaps where mentoring within the institution is unavailable. These groups can support LDs in building a shared professional identity and mitigating feelings around being misunderstood and lack of status and autonomy within academia (Bickle et al., 2021).

Reflective practice:

Yanchar & Hawkey (2014) argue that LDs become at least somewhat aware of their design sense upon reflection” (p. 286), suggesting that experience alongside the critical reflection of practice are both important to building design maturity. Fellowships such as HEA and CMALT may provide opportunities to engage in reflective practice on experience while simultaneously gaining professional recognition. Further research, should be undertaken as to what value such fellowships provide to LDs and how such fellowships are perceived and utilised by managers in terms of relevance for LDs progression purposes.

Development and progression at and beyond expert level

Once within a learning design role in the Australian HE sector, there can be limited opportunities to progress to higher level positions, as these roles typically do not progress further than HEW 8 level (Slade et al., 2019), presumably in most cases equivalent to an “expert” Senior Learning Designer (c.f. Mitchell et al., 2017).

While HE managers and leaders have suggested LDs may wish to move into academic or management positions (Slade et al., 2019), LDs have expressed differing views on their progression preferences, with many instead wishing to stay in existing or similar roles (Slade, et al., 2019). The literature is unclear as to why, but one possible reason is that LDs may be cautious of losing their learning design identity and opportunities to apply their practice. Another may be lack of professional experience and recognition needed to progress into other roles – for example, many academic positions (particularly Academic B/C level onwards) require both a PhD degree and publication record – which LDs, working as professional staff – may not have. There is often no requirement for professional staff to hold a PhD, and often no workload allocation for research. This may make transitioning from a professional to an academic position difficult for many LDs. This may be what Sage & Sankey (2021) identified as the “glass ceiling” (p. 28) in learning design. Institutions and researchers should therefore explore further options around both progression and transition across roles and fields that may support LDs diverse needs and career preferences.

A professional development ‘ecosystem’

Based on the literature, we propose considering learning design professional development as an *ecosystem* made up of formal and informal learning activities or opportunities, relevant at different career stages. We provide a simplified framework based on the LD literature and the Dreyfus model of skill acquisition (Dreyfus & Dreyfus, 1980; 1991), While it may have limitations (Peña, 2010) and is untested for LDs, the Dreyfus model has been discussed and applied to a range of professions such as pilots and nurses (Daley, 1999). Categorisations of LD career stages from novice to expert in the literature also bear similarities to the Dreyfus model, As such, it holds value as an underpinning model for exploring the professional growth of LDs.

The Dreyfus model suggests that individuals go through stages of skill acquisition or competence categorised as Novice, Advanced Beginner, Competent, Proficient and Expert. These stages refer to an individual’s ability to solve relevant problems, their reliance on rules vs. ability to adapt rules based on context, and level of unconsciousness or ‘intuition’ when undertaking the work.

Our framework has been organised with an axis related to stages of professional competence from Novice to

Expert, however we note that due to LDs skillsets when entering the field, arguably LDs may be beginning at a stage closer to Advanced Beginner or potentially even Competent (Dreyfus, 1980; 1991). The other axis shows informal to formal learning as a spectrum. Drejer (2000) and Daley (1999) both discuss formal vs. informal learning in relation to the Dreyfus model. Daley (1999) notes that those in novice stages are more likely to rely on formal learning, whereas those moving to competent and expert stages of competence are more likely to utilise and benefit from informal mechanisms. Our image loosely plots professional development opportunities that we are aware of in the Australian landscape against these two axes to form a draft ‘ecosystem’ or professional development landscape.

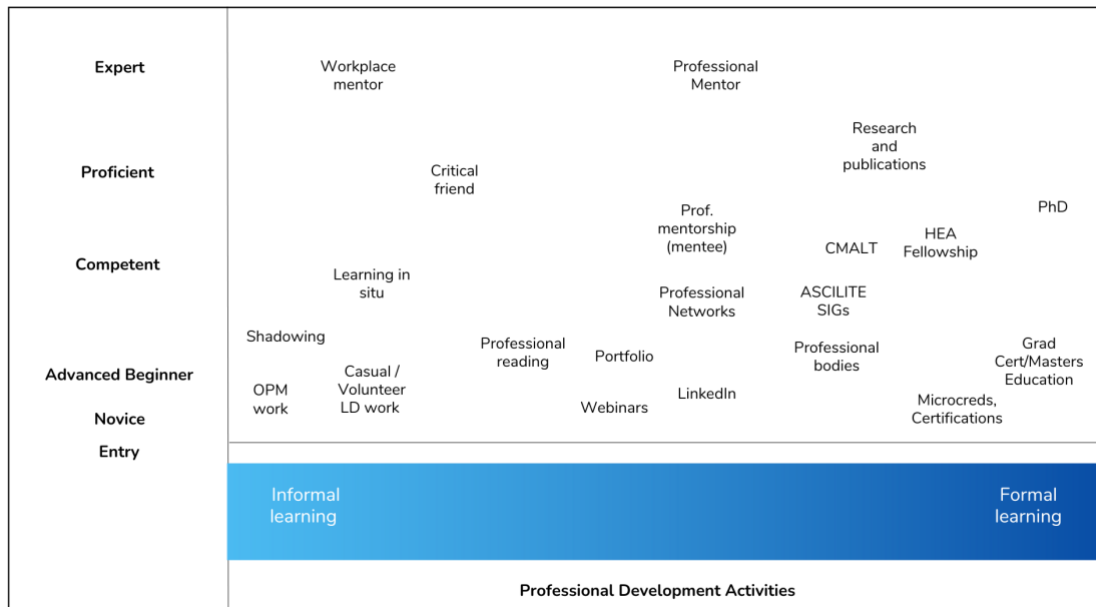


Figure 1: A proposed Learning Designer professional development ecosystem

We note some activities will span multiple stages despite how the image is currently presented. However, we offer this draft ecosystem to begin a further conversation related to LD professional competence and professional development. This image can also act as a conversation starter between LDs and managers about their professional development, and to identify gaps and opportunities within institutions, the HE sector and learning design community. We hope to validate the image with the learning design community and convert it into a digital resource that can continue to be updated dynamically.

Conclusion and thoughts for the future

In this paper we have aimed to synthesise and clarify the ways in which LDs and learning design as a field may progress and mature through professional development. We have also identified challenges related to limited entry, recognition and progression pathways.

Professional development is only one part of the puzzle. Other aspects related to institutional organisational structures and progression pathways should also be developed alongside professional development in a holistic way, to retain a coordinated, robust, and resilient workforce. There is an opportunity to better define the roles and progression pathways of LDs in relation to other roles. HE institutions should aim to better recognise and resolve progression limitations which likely impact retention and morale, and to understand and utilise these third space roles more effectively, including to leverage LDs alongside other roles to better meet future challenges thrown at the sector. This could in turn give LDs an ability to reconceptualise learning design as a relational role, identify transferable skills and alternate pathways, and to better define and imagine the future of the profession for themselves, for their own development and wellbeing and for maturity of what learning design could be.

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