



LEARNING DESIGN VOICES

PREPRINT

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What might learning design become in the post-COVID university?: A response to Sue Bennet's "Learning Design Voices" provocation

by Sukaina Walji

Introduction

From my time starting a fledgling project developing Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) at the University of Cape Town (UCT) in 2013, to recruiting our first learning designers and continuing to develop my own learning design capabilities, I have seen how we have moved from tentative and derivative approaches to course and curriculum design using a mix of borrowed methodologies (often gleaned from corporate e-learning) to contextually relevant and confident approaches which are embedded in a theorised field of practice. Added to this, thoughtful learning designers are still iterating and innovating, which is what makes learning design a fulfilling profession and why it accommodates people from many different work and disciplinary backgrounds. As Director of the Centre for Innovation in Learning and Teaching (CILT) at UCT, it is intensely meaningful to be part of developing this field and profession.

Reflecting on Sue Bennett's chapter in this volume opens up some productive areas for further deliberation around the role of learning design in a university. In asking a series of open questions about who does learning design in a university and how the job role and associated practices might evolve to meet the needs of both staff and students going forward, it is clear that learning design is to be seen as a field that is still being shaped and which perhaps needs to be reimaged and reinvigorated to meet new and emerging requirements.

Changing and contested roles for learning designers in higher education

As Sue Bennett mentions with regards to the Australian context, the field and associated practices of Learning Design have several tributaries. There is some provenance coming from educational development in universities; in the South African context, learning design and the specific job title of "learning designer" has recently become more prevalent as more universities offer blended and online course offerings as part of their increasing flexibility in the provision of teaching and learning. In line with global trends, learning designers are being sought after in many South African learning contexts, such as universities, schools, businesses, corporate training, educational technology providers, governmental organisations, charitable organisations and the like, leading to a proliferation of similar-sounding job descriptions and a sense of a community forming around the field of learning design.

The value of specialist and sometimes disciplinary focused learning designers is also becoming increasingly recognised. Full-scale course production teams will have at least one if not more learning designers who shepherd the course design process, in some cases providing project management and coordination or business development roles. Centres of teaching and learning have built capacity for offering learning design services (Czerniewicz, 2021) and the experience of COVID-19 and the need to support shifts to different forms of online learning has highlighted the need for central support services, including learning design expertise (Trotter et al., 2022). Yet, while learning designers have become more prominent, often leading course production teams in blended and online course development, their status in a university as a mainstream occupation or service is still something that is being established and negotiated. There are variations in conditions of service across the sector, with learning designers being employed on either academic conditions of service or as professionals with a practitioner orientation with little consistency and overlapping job roles.

The notion of learning design as a field comprising a set of professional practices that support teaching is now also more prevalent in the mainstream teaching space, particularly when courses and programmes are redesigned. More university teachers are accustomed to or have worked with learning designers and are familiar with their methods and processes. This represents a significant shift in understanding of the value of learning design in the course and curriculum design process and creates new opportunities for the practice of learning design as it becomes more mainstream in higher education. As Bennett suggests, learning design skills are increasingly part of the repertoire of university teachers in the sense that while university teachers have always designed teaching, this may in the past have been more implicit, whereas taking a learning design approach requires that designs be made explicit and offer opportunities for reflection. The idea of *teaching as design* (Laurillard, 2012) is one that underpins learning design. Developing the capacity of university teachers as part of improving and making teaching practices explicit is increasingly recognised as part of the learning design function, whether it happens through formal staff development or as part of experiential learning through a course or programme development process (Aitchison et al., 2020).

Even though learning design is better established in university contexts, the nature and purpose of learning design is increasingly subject to productive critique. If teaching is a political act, so is learning design. Who does learning design, what discourses underpin models and theories, whether the purpose of learning design should be to address inequities and who cares for learning designers are important conversations that put a spotlight on learning design practices and their relationship to the higher education context (Costello et al., 2022). Contextually sensitive and culturally aware learning design de-centres the focus on the implementation of models and methodologies (often imported from Western contexts) which focus on creating materials and pre-designed courseware, akin to an outcomes-based approach. Instead, learning design practices increasingly acknowledge the positionality of learning designers, teachers and students as design actors who enact teaching and learning through responding to design and their own experiences, while being continuously shaped by contextual factors and institutional cultures. This signals that teaching environments are emergent, variable, complex and may require adaptation (Goodyear & Carvalho, 2019). Bennett alludes to these possibilities in asking what learning design might become and

whether it can navigate some of the tensions between what is considered emergent teaching and what is seen as design.

Learning designers as relational and embodied actors

This emergent approach signals a shift from some of the comfortable tenets of learning design and a "plug and play mentality". It also represents an opportunity for learning design to be more relevant and responsive to the contexts of students and teachers and to address institutional imperatives. Here, adopting a socio-material lens guides a conceptualisation of learning design which is more tentative and which posits that teaching and learning environments encompass humans, digital tools, artefacts, designs and discourses (Gourlay et al., 2021). In such an environment, agency is distributed amongst various actors in what is usefully termed "entangled pedagogy" where "pedagogy is constituted not just by methods and technology, but also the purposes, contexts and values of teachers, students and other stakeholders" (Fawns, 2022, p. 4).

Learning designers are therefore embodied actors in relation to others, including teachers and students. Rejecting both pedagogical determinism or technological essentialism, a socio-materialist lens foregrounds the importance of understanding and analysing relationships and connections between material and embodied entities, which continually shape and inform each other. While the notion of distributed or entangled agency may suggest messiness for learning design practices, this framing provides an opportunity to reimagine roles and shape educational futures. Reflecting on the role of the teacher in relation to learning design, Beetham and Sharpe (2019) consider how a focus on design as teaching has impacted on the agency of teachers, whereby "aspects of learning design have been handed over to non-teaching professionals within the more complex, disaggregated structures of the modern college or university" (p.10). The opportunity to reimagine and revitalise the role of the university teacher in digital teaching spaces (Bayne et al., 2020) can inform how learning designers choose to exercise their agency, particularly in relation to how they interact with and centre working with teachers. Universities need to engage with these conversations as part of shaping the nature and culture of the post-digital university, with Sue Bennett's scenarios providing indicators of possible directions.

How learning designers should be developed

The conception of learning designers as relational and embodied actors begs the question as to how to support the professional development of learning designers to take account of complex and relational teaching ecosystems. Learning design is a growing field globally with increasing formal professional development opportunities, although more research is needed in the South African context about how learning designers are recruited and trained.

Universities require learning designers who can critically reflect on their own practice, understand teaching as emergent as well as designed practice, and can work in agile and flexible roles within a university. Senior university leaders will need to invest in appropriate professional development opportunities. There is also a need to recognise that learning designers as embedded actors themselves may experience oppressions and contestations in university structures based on their positionality and background (Romero-Hall, 2021).

The private educational technology sector in South Africa as well as globally is growing, influencing and perhaps reifying a particular approach to learning design that tends to focus

on pre-designed outcomes and design standardisation for efficiency and scale. While there is much to learn from corporate models, South African university teaching and learning environments are complex and relational and undergirded by deep inequalities, requiring learning designers to engage with broader issues of social justice and equity and at times take on advocacy roles for marginalised students.

Learning designers as change agents for teaching

Going beyond a more nuanced and contextually aware approach to learning design that accepts the messiness and emergence of teaching spaces, there is an opportunity for learning designers to be change agents for teaching in an institution. They often have unique insights into a course or programme and in their facilitating of conversations with university teachers, content experts and course teams they will often broker conversations and reflection. Learning designers who work directly and as part of embedded teaching teams also have the opportunity to develop the learning design capacity of university teachers in ways to strengthen teachers' agency. Whether learning designers primarily work with a product-oriented mindset (producing a course or materials) or whether they are about developing a person (Aitchison et al., 2020; Pallitt et al., 2018) may depend on the project or context. It is likely that there are multiple entry points to influence and shape institutional teaching practices.

This is a productive time to be a learning designer in South Africa. The field is more established and there are many opportunities to forge a meaningful career in university settings. Through support and dialogue, learning designers have the potential to shape teaching and learning through understanding what it means to design for complex teaching environments. Enmeshed in an entanglement within a university ecosystem, grappling with the relationality of pedagogy and technology, and imbued with their own agency, learning designers need to take on the complexities of the university and its various challenges and imperatives.

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