

How learning development and learning design can inform each other: reflections and discussion points

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Poster abstract

Learning Development and Learning Design have contributed to the transformation of higher education (HE) over recent decades, in the move towards a learner-centred approach in HE. While Learning Design is still somewhat ill-defined and emergent, practice has quickly gained traction since the Covid-19 pandemic, and it is now generally well embedded into academic training and institutional terminology (JISC, 2022). What does the intersection of these two 'learning' fields look like, and how could existing collaboration be strengthened for the benefit of learners? This poster aimed to promote discussion on the topic.

The poster briefly summarises the history of Learning Design and explores commonalities in the two fields such as an interest in universal design, a focus on empathy, inclusivity, and active learning approaches.

Then it explores the limits of Learning Design and gives examples of ways in which the author's practice as a Learning Designer is strongly influenced by Learning Development. In particular, it discusses how Learning Development values, as laid out by ALDinHE provide a grounding for the author, and how the substantial body of work in Academic Literacies (Lillis, 2019) provides a critical framing for working with academic teams when exploring issues of belonging, identity and student learning within Learning Design.

Finally, it explores how roles intersect, how practitioners from the two fields do (and could) work together, for example, to collectively deepen understanding about the learning experience and improve co-creation with students. It also outlines what adopting a strong 'design' approach could offer the Learning Development community.

Keywords: design thinking; learner-centred design; third-space; partnerships.

Community response

The distinction between Learning Development and Learning Design is not always clear. For many higher education (HE) practitioners the development of learning is intertwined with the design of the learning activities. Interestingly, in UK HE institutions there is a great variability of the job titles and descriptors that professionals engaging in Learning Development and Learning Design are given. In some institutions a role requires the ability to equally engage with both development and design of learning activities, while in others different professionals are employed in each area of expertise.

This online poster presentation started by defining the differences between these two areas of learning support, while acknowledging the unique challenges practitioners working in them face. The poster focused on the common goals and aims for the two areas of learning support and the possible synergies that could be developed through future collaborations.

During the online poster presentation there was a lot of interest from the audience and lively exchanges in the chat space. Some attendees reflected on their related professional experiences:

It was so nice to see (Learning) Design thinking represented here. At my institution we've made HUGE strides to utilise design thinking throughout a lot of our service delivery. I've been very influenced by the Framework for Innovation by the Design Council (n.d.), specifically the double diamond (Fallin, 2022). What I like about your poster, is how you relate design thinking to ALDinHE values, and specifically draw attention to design thinking step 1 – empathy. If more initiatives in HE started with this frame, we'd have a much kinder, student-centred, human-centred sector. I'd be particularly interested to find out more around the link between design thinking and Learning Design – in recognition that these are distinct things.

Other attendees discussed the crossover between this poster presentation and the poster presentations of Jodi Gregory, and of Anne-Kathrin Reck. They identified 'design thinking'

as a common emergent area for learning support at present that could be further explored through future collaborations and publications.

Editorial comment

There are three features that make this poster presentation unique.

- It started by clarifying the ‘design-development continuum’ and the different approaches and expectations that UK HE institutions have chosen to ensure that both elements of learning support are available.
- The use of ‘bird analogies’ to explore the differences and synergies between these two communities of practice was a clear practical example of the power of design thinking. Thus, revealing that design thinking supports sharing complex messages in a visual and easily accessible manner.
- The offer for collaboration across two separate fields of learning support practice and the desire to identify collaborative ways to support the learners’ experience across the UK HE sector.

Image 1. A flock of water birds representing the ‘shared opportunities’ between Learning Development and Learning Design to support the learners’ experience (copyright free image).



Author's reflection

Over time my role has changed, shifting away from direct support of students, and creating Learning Development resources towards more of a Learning Design focus. I still keep a 'Learning Development' lens in my role but was motivated to create this poster to see if I could find ways to reconnect more with Learning Development. I really enjoyed the poster presentations at last year's conference, and the space it created for exploring connection between different topics and themes and I was excited to be involved this year. I was thrilled to find connectivity with other poster presenters, both directly with Anne Kathrin-Reck's poster around design thinking, but also in exploring nature metaphors with Jodi Gregory. As a more peripheral member of the ALDinHE community, this connectivity has reinforced the value for me of learning from the community and given me bit more confidence in what I can contribute in an interdisciplinary way.

The impact for me on participating in the posters has already exceeded my expectations. Lee Fallin, Anne-Kathrin Reck, and I have started conversations around design thinking in Learning Development, which has enhanced my insight into Learning Development at other institutions and taken me down a new avenue of research for exploring inclusive practice. Lee's question around the link between Learning Design and design thinking has thrown open the whole question of 'design' for me, and I am already able to see stronger connectivity between the many student-centred, creative Learning Development practices and the design literature I am exploring.

Acknowledgments

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Author details

Catherine Turton is a Learning Designer from Solent University, whose practice is informed by the Learning Development community. Catherine integrates Learning Development literature and perspectives into her support of course teams. Catherine is always looking for ways to further her understanding of the accessibility needs of students, and improve the digital accessibility in her work, so as to further support course teams to meet the needs of all learners. Catherine has a background in languages teaching and English for Academic Purposes (EAP).

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