"Many hats one heart": A scoping review on the professional identity of learning designers

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Learning Designers are increasingly employed in universities to support institutional digital and pedagogical transformation agendas, which are posited to better meet the diverse and changing needs of a heterogeneous student body. Despite broad commitment to investing in these roles, surprisingly little is known about what learning designers in higher education actually do in practice. This paper reports on the preliminary findings of a scoping review that thematically analysed pertinent literature, to explore what is currently espoused about the professional identity of learning designers in higher education. The review identified 40 indicators of the knowledge, skills and attributes required of learning designers in the higher education sector. This research provides valuable insights for both individuals and institutions. The findings provide universities with an evidence-informed perspective of the learning designer, including an account of the unique capabilities of learning designers as transformative change agents to student learning. For individual learning designers the findings provide a comprehensive list of indicators to benchmark role responsibilities against, and a framework through which professional identity can be comprehended.

Keywords: learning designer, instructional designer, educational technologist, professional identity

Introduction

Who are learning designers? In a thematic analysis of 37 position descriptions, Mitchell, Simpson, and Adachi (2017) found a "significant overlap and/or disconnection between [...] TEL worker roles and their expected practices" (p.4). The skills and knowledge necessary for TEL workers such as academic developers and learning designers often did not reflect their job title - that is the primary practice of a designer was not to design (Mitchell et al., 2017, p. 4). Indeed, this ambiguity is reflected in the roles of the authors, with four of the five authors identifying as a learning designer, but only one having learning designer as their job title.

Building on a Mitchell et al. (2017) study, this paper aims to provide clarity and greater definition around the professional identity of the learning designer. It also aims to identify key skills, knowledge and attributes needed by learning designers to support teaching and learning within a higher education context. An initial scoping review, explored how the role of learning designers is reported in existing literature. The term 'learning designer' has been used to represent the work, in universities across the globe, undertaken by the roles associated with the job titles detailed in Table 1.

Literature review

According to the 2019 *Horizon report*, there is an increasing demand in higher education for "digitally rich learning environments and pedagogically sound learning experiences" that can be achieved by applying learning design expertise (Alexander et al., 2019, p. 15). The recommendations note that "institutions investing in learning designers […] will be better positioned to create rigorous, high-quality programming that serves the needs of all learners" (Alexander et al., 2019, p. 15). Consequently, learning design as an area of expertise that can have a direct correlation to the success of students is a warranted assumption. This sentiment was similarly echoed in the 2016 Intentional Futures report on *Instructional Design in Higher Education*, which claimed that "instructional designers have positioned themselves as pivotal players in the design and delivery of learning experiences" (Intentional Futures, 2016, p. 2). However, what is known of learning designers - their knowledge, skills and attributes – is limited.

According to the *International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction* (IBSTPI), learning designers require 22 competencies under five broad areas: professional foundations, planning and analysis, design and development, evaluation and implementation, and management. Most of these competencies relate to what learning designers do or know. It reignites the initial question: Who are learning designers? In this scoping review, we explored the professional identities of learning designers through a knowing-doing-being framework.

Methodology

This paper takes the form of a scoping review using the Arksey and O'Malley (2005) methodological framework. A scoping review is defined as "a form of knowledge synthesis that addresses an exploratory research question aimed at mapping key concepts, types of evidence, and gaps in research related to a defined area or field by systematically searching, selecting, and synthesizing existing knowledge" (Colquhoun et al., 2014, p. 1292).

The research question and sub-questions investigated are:

RQ: What is known in the existing literature about the role of the learning designer and their professional identity within higher education institutions?

1. What knowledge do learning designers in higher education need?
2. What do learning designers do in their role?
3. What attributes, values and qualities are required of learning designers in higher education?

Table 1: Key search terms

"learning designer" OR "instructional designer" OR "learning technologist" OR "educational designer" OR "educational technologist" OR "learning consultant" OR "teaching consultant"   AND "higher education" OR university   NOT school OR "K-12"

A set of inclusion and exclusion criteria was devised to establish some boundaries around this research (See Table 2). Four databases - ERIC, JStor, Springerlink and Google Scholar – were selected for this review as they were identified to be the most relevant databases for educational research.

Table 2: Inclusion and Exclusion criteria

Criterion	Inclusion criteria	Exclusion criteria
Time period	2008 – 2019	Studies earlier than 2008 or later than 2019
Language	English	Non-English
Countries	All	None
Type of article	Original research, literature reviews and conference papers, published in peer reviewed journals or conference proceedings	Articles that were not peer reviewed, opinion pieces, editorials and grey literature
Study focus	Higher education or university	Educational sectors outside of university or higher education
Literature focus	Articles focusing on the role of learning designers or aspects of their work	Articles that did not relate to the role and work of learning designers
Academic discipline	All	None
Databases	ERIC, JStor, Springerlink, Google Scholar	Other databases

The four researchers were grouped into pairs, each pair searched two of the selected databases and using the key search strategy outlined in Table 1 generated a primary list of articles. This initial search returned 4957 articles, which were subsequently sorted using an 'order of relevance' filter. The pairs then scanned the title and abstract of the sorted articles. Applying the inclusion/exclusion criteria detailed in Table 2, articles were then retained or removed from the list. No further articles were reviewed once a researcher found ten consecutive articles that did not meet the inclusion criteria. This secondary search resulted in 230 potential articles being identified. In the next search phase, the research pairs discussed the 230 papers and determined which papers should be included or excluded based on a more detailed application of the inclusion and exclusion criteria detailed in Table 2. Where there was a difference of opinion on whether an article met the inclusion criteria, full articles were accessed and

skimmed before arriving at a consensus regarding inclusion or exclusion. After duplicates were removed, this search phase returned 51 articles. These articles were allocated to individual researchers to read in detail and ensure they met the inclusion criteria. This final search phase resulted in 26 articles being selected for inclusion in this scoping study. A search of the reference list of all 26 articles added an additional three seminal articles, which were referenced in a number of the papers, to the final review list.

The selection of 29 articles was analysed by the researchers who 'charted the data' or coded their assigned articles in an excel spreadsheet, identifying and recording preliminary themes that emerged from the literature (Arksey & O'Malley, 2005). The next phase of our research will involve the cross-check of the data with all researchers to further validate the themes, prior to writing up the final results.

Results and Discussion

To better understand the role of learning designers, we posit the existence of an intersection between Barnett's (2009) knowing-doing-being framework and theories on professional identity construction. Based on Barnett's framework, the following definition is proposed as a lens for discussing the role of the learning designer:

- **Knowing/To Know**: This refers to the learning theories, models, pedagogies and technical knowledge that is necessary for learning designers.
- **Doing/To Do**: This refers to the methods, skills and practical application of expertise that learning designers engage with in their jobs.
- **Being/To Be**: This refers to the attitudes, beliefs, values, motives and experiences that shape the identity of learning designers. This approach is both epistemological and ontological in that it reflects on the personal values of individuals and articulates the professional identity of a learning designer.

This preliminary scoping review resulted in the analysis of 29 articles from 10 countries. The majority of the research undertaken within the articles (80.0%) was conducted in North America, followed by Asia (13.3%) and Europe (6.7%). There was a noticeable absence of articles from Africa or South America. Of these papers, 28 were from peer reviewed journals with one being a peer reviewed conference paper.

The term *Instructional Designer* was the most common label assigned to this professional role (88.5%) with *Learning Designer* being the next most common (7.7%) and *Educational Designer* third (3.8%). It was surprising that the term *Learning Technologist* did not appear in any of the articles. According to Obexer and Giardina (2016), *Learning Technologist* is a term particularly used in the UK.

There was a broad distribution of papers across 15 journals. Of these, three journals (Journal of Computing in Higher Education, Educational Technology Research and Development, and Tech Trends) each contributed five or more papers to this study. Between 2008 and 2019, the greatest number of papers in a single year to be published was in 2017 (n9). The majority of papers were qualitative research (n15), followed by mixed methods (n5) and literature reviews (n5), with quantitative research (n4) being the least frequent methodology.

This research examined what is reported in the literature relating to what learning designers in higher education institutions need to know, do and be, to fulfil their roles. The literature reported on all three dimensions of this role. Our preliminary thematic analysis revealed that the concept of Knowing appeared in a significant number of articles (n19) while the Doing aspect appeared in all articles (n29). The Being aspect of a learning designer role was the least reported dimension (n11). From the 29 articles, the researchers coded 40 indicators relating to Knowing (n9), Doing (n26) and Being (n5). In this section, we will briefly discuss how these aspects relate to the role and professional identity of learning designers.

Knowing

The literature indicates that learning designers are highly qualified professionals with the vast majority having graduate qualifications, typically master degrees and increasingly doctoral qualifications (Campbell, Schwier, & Kenny, 2009; Cox & Osguthorpe, 2003; Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2015; Shaw, 2012; Stevens, 2013). Our analysis of the literature revealed that the top three knowledge areas needed in the learning designer role were: instructional design and models (n13), technical knowledge (n13), and knowledge through professional learning (n13). Learning theories (n11) and educational research (n9) also ranked highly in the review. Through this analysis, three knowledge areas required by learning designers were identified:

- **Threshold concepts**: These include foundation in learning theories, instructional design principles and models, and knowledge of technology.
- **Just-in-time knowledge**: As the role of the learning designer is constantly changing (Obexer & Giardina, 2016), the analysis revealed that learning designers require knowledge regarding 1) answers to technical, pedagogical and learning environment problems, 2) updates and emerging technological or pedagogical underpinnings, and 3) discipline-specific content.
- **Contribution to new knowledge**: The analysis revealed that there is significant opportunity for learning designers to contribute to new knowledge by publishing research from their work (Obexer & Giardina, 2016). Learning designers often participate in or initiate research that results in conference presentations or writing of publications, often in collaboration with academic staff (Kumar & Ritzhaupt, 2017; Shaw, 2012). However, there are significant barriers to this form of knowledge creation for learning designers due to lack of time or skills (Obexer & Giardina, 2016).

Doing

The findings of the scoping review revealed that 26 of the 40 indicators coded from the articles, or 65 percent, related to what learning designers do and the skills they possessed to perform their role. This figure is significant as it suggests that the role of the learning designer within the broader literature is determined by what they do rather than know or be. Of the 26 indicators, course and assessment design (n18), providing expert advice (n15) and relationship building (n15) ranked the highest. Project management (n12) and digital asset management (n12) were also prominent in the papers. From a synthesis of the articles and indicators, what learning designers do was categorised under five themes:

1. **Course and curriculum design**: Course and curriculum design formed the largest part of a learning designer's role, including assessment design, course development and evaluation.
2. **Project management:** Learning designers required critical thinking skills, teamwork and time management skills to be able to support and manage projects within the domain.
3. **Professional development:** Learning designers were also required to provide expert advice and professional development for academic staff.
4. **Stakeholder engagement:** Being able to build working relationships between staff and students through good communication and consensus building skills was also part of a learning designer's role.
5. **Asset production and technical support:** Learning designers were required to be involved in asset production and management, and systems administration.

Interestingly, what emerged through the analysis was the lack of discussion around *contribution to new knowledge*. While it has been suggested in other literature (IBSTPI, 2003; Slade, McGrath, & Greenway, 2018) that the role of the learning designer is partly academic - whether in the development of pedagogy or educational technology - there is a mismatch between what learning designers do and the knowledge they require.

Being

Within the professional identity framework, 'being' was least referred to with only five indicators and five articles referring to each of these indicators. The indicators included having a shared vision (n5), being an influencer/connector (n5), establishing governance (n5), having leadership (n4) and being ethical (n2). This gap in what it means *to be a learning designer* identified in the articles may be due to the evolving role of learning designers, highlighting the need for the role to be agile, to develop with emerging trends, and to be prepared for a constant re-definition of the role's scope of work and competency requirements (Halupa, 2019; Obexer & Giardina, 2016; Ritzhaupt & Kumar, 2015). As Hokanson, Miller, and Hooper (2008, p. 38) have argued, "being a designer and acting as a designer, therefore, becomes more important than understanding what tasks a designer does". Hence, beyond exemplifying leadership through practices such as modelling the way, inspiring a shared vision, challenging the process, enabling others to act, and encouraging the heart (Kouzes & Posner, 2011), learning designers need to develop designer resiliency, which is not defined by the complexity of the role but by the ongoing challenges that come with the role in an ever-changing field (Stefaniak, Baaki, Hoard, & Stapleton, 2018). Based on the analysis, urgent research is necessary to validate the findings and inform the professional identity of learning designers, as the values, attributes and ontological perspectives of learning designers are implied or rarely articulated within the papers.

Conclusion

Learning designers are critical to the success of higher education institutions, especially in implementing and achieving digital learning and teaching reform agendas that have an impact on student success. Our preliminary findings highlight that globally there is a paucity of research being conducted into the critical role of learning designers within higher education institutions. Whilst much is known about what learning designers know and do as seen from the findings of this study, little is known about the professional identity of learning designers. As Ewing and Smith (2001, p. 16) assert, "[It is] impossible for us to separate out who we are from what we do: we bring our beliefs and our already acquired knowing and understanding to our practice. Being is embedded in our practice of doing and, through the doing, as practitioners we continue to become who we are." Therefore, if we are to move this profession forward, further research that seeks to establish higher education benchmarks for the entry to knowledge, skills and personal values, attributes and ontological perspectives required of learning designers working within the higher education sector is needed.

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