



# Knowing, doing and showing: a framework for evidencing education and learning designers' practice in higher education

**Jennifer Boreland**

Queensland University of Technology, Australia

**Tanya Henry**

The University of Queensland, Australia

**Sue Sharpe**

Australian National University, Australia

## ***Abstract***

Much has been written about the diverse roles, responsibilities, and competencies of third space professionals working in education and learning design. While these debates are important, this paper begins with the premise that, regardless of title or exact role description, all designers are competent; they bring professional expertise to learning design which contributes to quality teaching and learning in their institutions.

With that premise in mind, the purpose of this paper is to outline a possible Framework for designers to measure and evidence their competence and contributions either to use for future engagements and collaborations, to show impact of their practice on quality learning and teaching, to intentionally plan for design engagements, and/or to support applications for promotion or career progression. This paper is a response to what Williams et al. (2011) suggest is a need to know more about the challenges facing education and learning designers so that relevant scholarship can be produced, and to provide a vehicle for designers to clarify their professional identity and promote the importance of their position in the higher education ecosystem. While the authors work in the Australian context, we believe this response has global relevance.

**Keywords:** third space professionals; learning design; professional identity; career progression; evidencing impact; instructional design; education design; curriculum design.

## **Background**

Who are education and learning designers, what do they do, and how do they evidence they've done it well?

For those of us who work in this third space, we have heard these questions many times during coffee conversations, team meetings, workshops, forums, conferences, in special interest groups, online conversations, and in the literature. While the authors' experiences are rooted in an Australian context, anecdotally this is also true for colleagues worldwide.

Titles for the various roles in which third space professionals design for learning are as varied as the countries and institutions in which we work. We may be referred to as a learning designer, education designer, curriculum designer, instructional designer, and more (Bird, 2004; Mitchell et al., 2017; Altena et al., 2019). It is clear that no single term suffices for the variety of contexts in which designers work. For the purposes of this paper, we have adopted the approach taken by Pretero et al. (2023) where, for simplicity, we will use the term learning designer to include 'those HE professionals responsible for liaising with academic staff and designing and developing learning experiences for students (either online or not)' (p.515).

Seek (n.d.) estimates job growth for this field as 21.7% within 5 years. However, the Australian and New Zealand Standard Classification of Occupations (ABS, 2022) does not recognise any of the title variants above. Currently in Australia, there are no universally accepted definitions or standards and, as Livingston and Ling (2021) point out, 'Despite the growing number of third space workers in higher education, policy and structural shifts that recognise third space workers have not been universally forthcoming' (p.649). In Australia then, the 'professionalisation' of learning designers in higher education remains an emerging area.

In 2004, Bird outlined the long history of the 'debates around the professional identity, roles and responsibilities' of those working in the third space in learning design and development (Bird, 2004, p.124). The debates and conversations continue 20 years on, with calls for development of lists of core competencies, professional standards, measurable KPIs and/or targeted courses in learning design. The body of work that sets

about unpacking what learning designers do, the elements of the role, and the work towards developing a set of professional competencies and responsibilities is important, substantial, and ongoing (Kenny et al., 2005; IBSTPI, 2013; Obexer and Giardina, 2016; Park and Luo, 2017; Slade et al., 2017; Yalçın et al., 2021; Heggart and Dickson-Deane, 2022; Hinze et al., 2022).

In the higher education sector, academic staff have a clear understanding of professional teaching standards expected, shown in the UK Professional Standards Framework (PSF) and the Australian University Teaching Criteria and Standards Framework, for example. These standards are strongly supported by institutions through academic development units or centres to identify, build, and evidence their own capability and contribution to quality teaching and learning (Krause, 2008; Smith, 2008; Higher Education Academy, 2013; Olsson and Roxå, 2013; Subbaye and Vithal, 2017).

In the UK, the PSF has been redeveloped to be more inclusive of professional staff who support learning and thus recognise their contribution (Shotts and Shaw, 2022). The UK does also have some recognition schemes (Nutt, 2022); however, at an institutional level, this recognition and support is far less common, and contributions remain largely invisible (Denny, 2022; McIntosh and Nutt, 2022). This is of concern, as perceived legitimacy of third space work is not automatic, but rather provided on the basis of knowledge and successful project outcomes (Moran and Misra, 2018) and satisfying academic and other stakeholder needs (Heggart and Dickson-Deane, 2022).

Designers are closely involved in activities related to teaching and learning which contribute to a positive student experience and successful student outcomes. However, the established academic frameworks and mechanisms for collecting and collating evidence are not fit for purpose for learning designers and thus, without a means to evidence that contribution, it remains largely hidden, undocumented, and unacknowledged. This leads to our central question: how can education and learning designers evidence and demonstrate the value of their contributions to teaching and learning?

## ***The designer's dilemma***

The question of evidence is of key interest to the authors. As designers, we recognise our work in the aforementioned literature on knowledge, skills, and competencies. Using the definitions of knowing and doing proposed by Altena et al. (2019), we are confident that we 'know' and we 'do': we are capable and competent in undertaking our work in its various forms, drawing on our knowledge of quality educational design. We are therefore less interested in contesting what we know and do, and more interested in exploring how we *evidence* what we do. The dilemma is: how do we 'show' the impact of our work on students, staff, and our institutions? How can 'showing' help us document our capabilities for career progression or demonstrate our value and validate our identity as professionals? And, if we had a way to 'show', could we be more intentional about our ways of working and perhaps drive institutional change to support and adequately resource our work?

While we accept the importance of evidence-based practice, there is limited research on how best to evidence the impact and value of our practice in all its complexity. Formal evaluation is often deprioritised by learning designers and their teams, though there is evidence that informal, and often ad hoc, evaluation frequently occurs due to the common use of iterative models (Williams et al., 2011). This is potentially problematic, as formal evaluation is more likely to yield evidence of impact. To work effectively in the sector, it is vital to create a narrative that outlines the importance of good learning design and supports that narrative with evidence.

It has recently been acknowledged in Australia that student experience metrics, while valuable, are only indicators and do not translate straightforwardly to improved learning and teaching (Australian Government Department of Education, 2023). Despite this, student evaluation surveys have long been central to evaluating educational quality. Within the reported metrics however, learning design takes a backseat. Obscured within broad categories such as 'good teaching' or 'overall experience', the contribution of learning design often goes unreported despite its potentially crucial role in shaping impactful educational programmes.

Similarly, while learning analytics drawn from course results or LMS activity can be useful to quantify activity or engagement, they can be difficult to use as evidence of the impact of learning design unless there is a clear link between the design and activity. While valuable,

purely quantitative analytics do not necessarily reflect the true depth or impact of well-designed learning experiences, which may be a contributing factor to the limited adoption of the data in informing learning design (Muljana and Luo, 2020). Further, aggregated analytics data often fails to show important group-specific equity impacts of initiatives (Baker, 2020). As evidence in the diverse learning design field must serve a broad range of purposes – from justifying departmental budgets and highlighting benefits, to supporting career progression or yearly staff reviews – then necessarily the metrics used must be broader and more nuanced than analytics and student experience data. A better solution is required.

### ***A possible solution***

Drawing on the authors' experiences in three Australian universities in roles in learning design, education design, and design management/leadership, together with the existing literature related to learning design, we have developed and are proposing a Framework for measuring and evidencing learning design practice.

The Framework is based on Smith's (2008) '4Q model of evaluation' for academic staff and Western Sydney University's (2023) Framework for academics to evidence teaching practice, drawing on Kern et al. (2015) Dimensions of Activities Related to Teaching. The Western Sydney University (WSU) Framework aims to document impact in teaching and learning and support requests for grants, promotions, teaching awards, and fellowships, going explicitly beyond student feedback mechanisms (WSU, 2023). These frameworks were known to the authors as robust tools utilised by academic staff in the Australian higher education context. Given they are considered 'fit for purpose' for academic staff, they provided a good starting point on which to base a framework that was 'fit for purpose' for designers. The WSU Framework, in particular, resonated with the authors and thus was used as the basis for the new Framework while the work of Smith (2008) and Kern et al. (2015) helped clarify our thinking.

A design lens was applied to the WSU Framework, drawing on competency literature and utilising data gathered from two HERDSA conference presentations (Henry, 2022; Henry and Boreland, 2023). The Framework integrates six key dimensions which we believe provide opportunities to document evidence: student centred design; curriculum design

and innovation; professional development; promotion and sharing of quality design; scholarship of teaching and learning; recognition and reward; and leadership and influence. It then expands to include specific suggestions on the evidence that could be collated.

The result is produced below.

**Figure 1. Proposed Framework for evidencing learning design practice.**



We believe the Framework is a useful guide to evidencing the knowledge, skills, competencies, and capabilities we bring to our work. By necessity it references a range of activities in which we are involved to capture the previously described diversity of our roles

and responsibilities. We have developed the Framework with this diversity in mind, intending it to be fit for purpose for all learning designers regardless of role or context.

Accordingly, it is not anticipated that every dimension or item will be used by each individual. For example, an early career learning designer may not yet utilise the leadership dimension.

Using the Framework could benefit learning designers in: supporting our value proposition in collaborations with academic teams; guiding us to be more intentional in our engagements with academics; providing evidence to our institutions of the impact of good design on student outcomes; and supporting applications for promotion or highlighting potential pathways to future careers and bolstering applications for those new opportunities.

An additional benefit, we believe, is that using the Framework has the power to positively impact learning designers' sense of professional identity where professional identity is seen as a '...resource that people use to explain, justify and make sense of themselves in relation to others, and to the world at large' (MacLure, 1993, p.311).

As third space professionals are comparatively invisible in higher education and subject to frequent role definition, their identities are often formed less in response to job descriptions and more in relation to their personal skills, project accomplishments, and relationships (Smith et al., 2021). The Framework provides a means to evidence each of these elements. Using the Framework then, may be beneficial in helping all learning designers define their place in their institution and operate more effectively in it as well.

## ***The future***

The authors are currently utilising the Framework in their personal professional context to document and identify unity and commonality across teaching support roles in three Australian universities.

The Framework is, therefore, a work-in-progress still in the development phase. However, we believe it holds great promise for design practitioners to promote the value of learning

design work, inform intentional approaches to educational design, and support applications for promotion or career progression through showing what we know and do.

Further work and collaboration are required to validate the Framework and its value as a tool to evidence the multifaceted practice of learning design. Next steps include: inviting colleagues to pilot the Framework; making revisions based on feedback; and promoting the Framework more broadly. Ultimately, we hope it will serve as a catalyst for personal and institutional transformation, allowing learning designers to effectively demonstrate their important contribution to teaching and learning in higher education.

## **Acknowledgements**

The authors did not use generative AI technologies in the creation of this manuscript.

## **References**

Altena, S., Ng, R., Hinze, M., Poulsen, S. and Parrish, D. (2019) 'Many hats one heart: a scoping review on the professional identity of learning designers', in Y. W. Chew, K. M. Chan and A. Alphonso (eds) *Personalised Learning. Diverse Goals. One Heart: Proceedings of ASCILITE Conference*. Singapore, pp.359-364.

Australian Bureau of Statistics (2022) *ANZSCO - Australian and New Zealand standard classification of occupations*. Available at: <https://www.abs.gov.au/statistics/classifications/anzsco-australian-and-new-zealand-standard-classification-occupations/latest-release> (Accessed: 10 March 2024).

Australian Government Department of Education (2023) *Australian universities accord final report*. Available at: <https://www.education.gov.au/australian-universities-accord/resources/final-report> (Accessed: 14 March 2024).

Baker, P. (2020) 'Disaggregating learning data to support equity efforts: resources for college and university instructors', *Every Learner Everywhere*. Available at:

<https://www.everylearnereverywhere.org/blog/disaggregating-learning-data-adaptive-learning/> (Accessed: 27 March 2024).

Bird, J. (2004) 'Professional navel gazing: flexible learning professionals into the future', in R. Atkinson, C. McBeath, D. Jonas-Dwyer and R. Phillips (eds) *Beyond the comfort zone: Proceedings of the 21st ASCILITE Conference*. Perth, Australia, 5-8 December, pp.123-133.

Denney, F. (2022) 'Building bridges and connections: the language used to connect and define communities in the third space', in E. McIntosh and D. Nutt (eds) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education: studies in third space professionalism*. Routledge, pp.50-63.

Heggart, K. and Dickson-Deane, C. (2022) 'What should learning designers learn?', *Journal of Computing Higher Education*, 34, pp.281-296. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-021-09286-y>

Henry, T. (2022) 'Identifying and measuring learning designers' invisible impact', *On-site Oral Abstract Book HERDSA 2022 Annual Conference*. Melbourne, VIC, Australia, 27-30 June.

Henry, T. and Boreland, J. (2023) 'We're making a difference: empowering third space professionals to articulate their contribution to quality learning design in higher education', *On-site Oral Abstract Book HERDSA 2023 Annual Conference*. Brisbane, QLD, Australia, 4-7 July.

Higher Education Academy (2013) *Promoting teaching: making evidence count*. Available at: <https://advance-he.ac.uk/knowledge-hub/promoting-teaching-making-evidence-count> (Accessed: 28 March 2024).

Hinze, M., Altena, S. and Ng, R. (2022) 'Reconnecting with ourselves? Developing standards and competencies for Learning Designers [Panel]', *39th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational Technologies in Tertiary Education, ASCILITE 2022*. Sydney, NSW, Australia, 4-7 December.

- International Board of Standards for Training, Performance and Instruction (2013) *Instructional Designer Competencies and Performance Statements*. Available at: <https://ibstpi.org/competency-sets-services/instructional-designer-competencies/> (Accessed: 25 March 2024).
- Kenny, R., Zhang, Z. and Schwier, R. and Campbell, K. (2005) 'A review of what instructional designers do: questions answered and questions not asked', *Canadian Journal of Learning and Technology*, 31(1). Available at: <http://dx.doi.org/10.21432/t2jw2p>
- Kern, B., Mettetal, G., Dixson, M.D. and Morgan, R.K. (2015) 'The role of SoTL in the academy: upon the 25<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Boyer's scholarship reconsidered', *Journal of Scholarship for Teaching and Learning*, 15(3), pp.1-14. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14434/josotl.v15i3.13623>
- Krause, K.-L. (2008) *Documenting evidence of good teaching practice: strategies for academic staff*. Available at: [https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0004/479074/GPGEvidenceofGoodTeachingFINAL.PDF](https://www.westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0004/479074/GPGEvidenceofGoodTeachingFINAL.PDF) (Accessed: 17 November 2023).
- Livingston, K. and Ling, L. (2022) 'Third space workers in higher education in times of dislocated complexity', *European Journal of Education*, 57(4), pp.646-658. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1111/ejed.12523>
- McIntosh, E. and Nutt, D. (eds) (2022) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education: studies in third space professionalism*. Routledge.
- MacLure, M. (1993) 'Arguing for yourself: identity as an organising principle in teachers' jobs and lives', *British Educational Research Journal*, 19(4), pp.311-322.
- Mitchell, K., Simpson, C. and Adachi, C. (2017) 'What's in a name? The ambiguity and complexity of technology enhanced learning roles', in H. Partridge, K. Davis and J. Thomas (eds) *Me, Us, IT! Proceedings ASCILITE2017: 34th International Conference on Innovation, Practice and Research in the Use of Educational*

- Moran, E. and Misra, D. (2018) 'Professional doctorates: a pathway to legitimacy for non-academic HE professionals?', *London Review of Education*, 16(1), pp.75-89. Available at: <https://doi.org/https://doi.org/10.18546/LRE.16.1.08>
- Muljana, P.S. and Luo, T. (2021) 'Utilizing learning analytics in course design: voices from instructional designers in higher education', *Journal of Computing in Higher Education*, 33, pp.206-234. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s12528-020-09262-y>
- Nutt, D. (2022) 'Rewarding blended working and integrated practice', in E. McIntosh and D. Nutt (eds) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education: studies in third space professionalism*. Routledge, pp.252-264.
- Obexer, R. and Giardina, N. (2016) 'What is a Learning Designer? Support roles for collaborative E-Learning implementation', *Digitale Medien: Zusammenarbeit in der Bildung, Munster*. Available at: <https://www.waxmann.com/fileadmin/media/zusatztexte/3490Volltext.pdf> (Accessed: 12 March 2024).
- Olsson, T. and Roxå, T. (2013) 'Assessing and rewarding excellent academic teachers for the benefit of an organization', *European Journal of Higher Education*, 3(1), pp.40-61.
- Park, J. and Luo, H. (2017) 'Refining a competency model for instructional designers in the context of online higher education', *International Education Studies*, 10(9), pp.87-98. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.5539/ies.v10n9p87>
- Pretero, B. C., Tsatsaronis, J., Heggart, K., Vanderburg, R., and Bui, T. H. (2023) 'Forging the path in the third space: opportunities and challenges for Learning Designers in higher education', in T. Cochrane, V. Narayan, C. Brown, K. MacCallum, E. Bone, C. Deneen, R. Vanderburg and B. Hurren (eds) *People, partnerships and*

*pedagogies. Proceedings ASCILITE 2023*. Christchurch, pp.515-519. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.14742/apubs.2023.592>

Seek (n.d.) *Instructional designer*. Available at: <https://www.seek.com.au/career-advice/role/instructional-designer> (Accessed: 10 March 2024).

Shotts, J. and Shaw, M. (2022) 'Recognising and developing talent', in E. McIntosh and D. Nutt (eds) *The impact of the integrated practitioner in higher education: studies in third space professionalism*. Routledge, pp.236-243.

Slade, C., McGrath, D. and Greenaway, R. (2017) *Professionalisation in academic development: exploring learning designers roles in a changing higher education sector*. Available at: [https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:2ab3ceb/DigitalVersionLDPPoster.pdf?dsi\\_version=0ce3f84d3bbb1d393180085e198f0e5d](https://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:2ab3ceb/DigitalVersionLDPPoster.pdf?dsi_version=0ce3f84d3bbb1d393180085e198f0e5d) (Accessed: 5 March 2024).

Smith, C. (2008) 'Building effectiveness in teaching through targeted evaluation and response: connecting evaluation to teaching improvement in higher education', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 33(5), pp.517-533. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/02602930701698942>

Smith, C., Holden, M., Yu, E. and Hanlon, P. (2021) "'So what do you do?': Third space professionals navigating a Canadian university context", *Journal of Higher Education Policy and Management*, 43(5), pp.505-519. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1080/1360080X.2021.1884513>

Subbaya, R. and Vithal, R. (2017) 'Teaching criteria that matter in university academic promotions', *Assessment & Evaluation in Higher Education*, 42(1), pp.37-60.

Western Sydney University (2023) *Learning Futures – Evidencing your teaching practice beyond SFUs and SFTs*. Available at: [https://westernsydney.edu.au/\\_data/assets/pdf\\_file/0007/1897693/Evidencing\\_your\\_teaching\\_practice\\_beyond\\_SFUs\\_and\\_SFTs\\_FINAL\\_003.pdf](https://westernsydney.edu.au/_data/assets/pdf_file/0007/1897693/Evidencing_your_teaching_practice_beyond_SFUs_and_SFTs_FINAL_003.pdf) (Accessed: 17 November 2023).

Williams, D. D., South, J. B., Yanchar, S. C., Wilson, B. G. and Allen, S. (2011) 'How do instructional designers evaluate? A qualitative study of evaluation in practice', *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 59(6), pp.885-907.

Yalçın, Y., Ursavaş, Ö.F. and Klein, J.D. (2021) 'Measuring instructional design competencies of future professionals: construct validity of the ibstpi® standards', *Educational Technology Research and Development*, 69, pp.1701-1727. Available at: <https://doi.org/10.1007/s11423-021-10006-7>

## **Author details**

Jenny Boreland, Queensland University of Technology, has over 25 years of experience in education, including 16 years in higher education within three Australian universities. She has held both academic and professional roles and has worked extensively with international students, higher degree research candidates and in academic development. Currently, she manages a team of learning designers, supporting them and promoting their contributions to creating quality educational experiences for positive learner outcomes.

Tanya Henry, The University of Queensland, is a Learning Designer with extensive experience in education design, teaching, and project management. Her passion is mentoring, supporting, and leading others to achieve their potential. She has a Master of Learning and Development and excels at creating innovative and inclusive learning experiences.

Sue Sharpe, Australian National University, is an Education Designer, with a Graduate Certificate in Tertiary Teaching, a Master of Exercise Science and 15 years' experience in higher education across professional, academic and management roles. She is committed to mentoring and supporting others and co-facilitates the Higher Education Research and Development Society of Australasia (HERDSA) Scholarship of Teaching and Learning special interest group. Sue publishes and presents on communities of practice, third space roles, assessment, and accessibility and inclusion, informed by a history of cross-institutional and transdisciplinary collaboration.

## ***Licence***

©2024 The Author(s). This is an open-access article distributed under the terms of the Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License (CC-BY 4.0), which permits unrestricted use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited. See <http://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>. Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education (JLDHE) is a peer-reviewed open access journal published by the Association for Learning Development in Higher Education (ALDinHE).