



## Editorial

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Writing for publication can be tough. Designing, producing, and submitting work for the judgment of others requires much commitment, perseverance, and love for the work itself. Yet on the other end of this difficult process, editors, reviewers, and publishers grapple with similarly challenging demands. Publishing good research and championing quality while nurturing talent through kindness and constructive dialogue are the concerns of every academic journal's editorial board. Concerns that might fluctuate and shift in the dynamic context of research development and knowledge creation in a given field.

For sixteen years now, the *Journal of Learning Development in Higher Education* has been evolving alongside its vibrant Learning Development (LD) community of readers and contributors. Our commitment to promoting and enabling inclusive publishing as an act of professional and personal sovereignty has guided our flexible, community-responsive

approach to knowledge dissemination. Our adaptability and organic publication process has served us well, as we released issues in rhythm with our authors' needs, our reviewers' availability, and our readers' engagement. This success of the journal has meant that submissions have increased exponentially and now, building on this foundation of growth, we are poised to enhance our processes to better serve our community.

Starting this year, and with the exception of the current edition, we will publish regular issues quarterly – in March, June, and December, with our regular Conference Special Issue in September. This move towards predictable publication schedules reflects both the journal's maturation and our commitment to supporting authors through clear timelines. In between these regular issues, we also offer our global partners opportunities to collaborate on special issues, both guest-edited and edited by our team. We look forward to receiving expressions of interest for special collections that will foster courageous conversations in the field.

One of the successes of the journal we are building on is the remarkable growth in our international reach. In the past six years, we have experienced a six-fold increase in international submissions, with current readership spanning 114 countries. Our inclusion in major indices – the Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ), the British Education Index (BEI), the Education and Resources Information Centre (ERIC), and Google Scholar – alongside partnerships with CrossRef, VOCEDplus, and the Society for Research into Higher Education, reflects our commitment to being an active participant in global scholarly dialogues.

This evolution in the journal coincides with significant developments in our editorial capacity. In January, we were delighted to welcome seven new members to our editorial board: Laura Barnett from the University of Surrey, Victoria Boyd from the City of Glasgow College, Scotland, Steven Briggs from the University of Bedfordshire, Melike Bulut Al Baba from Sheffield Hallam University, Laura Dyer from the University of Leeds, Joshua Reilly from Queensland University of Technology, Australia, and Paula Villegas Verdu from University of St. Andrews, Scotland. Their combined expertise, energy, and dedication to our mission has strengthened our ability to support courageous scholarship in Learning Development and push the boundaries of what is possible for the journal and the community it serves.

The standardisation of our publication schedule thus represents another exciting chapter in the journal's ongoing development, and we hope that the predictability of our issues and clearer publication timelines will be a welcome change for our authors, readers, and reviewers. While we embrace these structural improvements, our core commitment remains unchanged: we will continue to innovate and respond to our community's evolving needs, so *JLDHE* remains at the heart of its vibrant and inspiring scholarly conversations.

Indeed, the eighteen diverse contributions to this issue capture the tenor of the concerns and ideas that currently preoccupy us in higher education. We are proud to introduce seven research papers, three case studies, three opinion pieces, one brief communication, and four book reviews that offer fresh perspectives on a range of topics, from innovative classroom pedagogies to faculty development, promising to deliver something of interest to every reader. We are also honoured to introduce a new format in *JLDHE* – the tribute – which will allow us to commemorate remarkable colleagues who have shaped our field. Our inaugural tribute celebrates the legacy of Tom Burns through the moving reflections of four close colleagues, offering a quiet moment to contemplate how exceptional individuals can profoundly influence our community.

The collection opens with a paper by David Gilani and Liz Thomas who make a case for student sense of belonging – implicated as it is in academic performance, engagement, retention and wellbeing – being worth a serious exploration to understand how and why it can be nurtured and sustained. To answer this need, the authors present a critical literature review that aims to establish those factors most significant in influencing belonging. Taking a systematised approach, they interrogate 118 articles to establish the relationships between the various factors contributing to belonging, finding that the individual and personalised nature of belonging may lend itself to a relational pedagogies approach, although the sheer number identified may appear off-putting to those who support student belonging.

Assessment and feedback are vital to learning, but poor practices can often provoke at best a passive response from students. In their innovative study, Jill Gould and Patricia Day investigate the impact of audio-visual feedback modes on student engagement in a community nursing course, comparing written feedback with audio, audio-visual, and visual methods. The students-participants indicated a clear preference for audio-visual or

visual feedback forms, seeing it almost as an extra tutorial with the marker. The emotional resonance of the marker's voice helped to build student confidence and stimulate reflection on their work and progress. Regardless of format, however, preparing students for feedback and its interpretation appears crucial for its success.

Sakirulai Olufemi Isiaq and Louise Usher examine postgraduate students' perceptions of the effectiveness of learning within computer-based environments, comparing collaborative learning and group work. The authors introduce their concept of the Effective Learning Triangle (ELT): Facilitator, Environment, and Learning, where the facilitator plays a pivotal role in designing sessions that align intended learning outcomes with the learning environment. The analysis of focus group discussions revealed four key themes: diverse perspectives and enriched learning; defined learning outcomes for effective peer interactions; critical thinking and knowledge construction; and bridging the generational divide. The authors conclude that thoughtfully designed collaborative learning activities must integrate diverse perspectives, leverage technology, and balance individual and group outcomes for transformative educational experiences.

'Discovering how students use generative artificial intelligence tools for academic writing purposes' examines the uses of generative Artificial Intelligence (GAI) by students in real time. By recording the screens of 30 student participants, the authors collected a snapshot of behaviours and choices demonstrating how these technologies are used and providing insights into their practical application. GAI was typically used to determine definitions, identify explanations and examples, with students finding it particularly helpful when creating plans and structures for their work. This research contributes to the growing body of evidence for the practical applications of GAI in the assessment process and in doing so sheds light on the ways that these technologies can enhance learning.

They say a picture is worth a thousand words. An image can convey intense meaning, tell a story, and be a powerful means of self-expression. What then is the potential for imagery to nurture authentic reflection? In the second paper, Jenny McDonald, Wendy Hu and Sylvia Heeneman discuss their use of photographic self-portraits to aid reflection among first- and second-year medical students, proposing a valuable alternative or addition to traditional written reflections. Within their longitudinal qualitative study, authors show that selfies can be used effectively to document social relationships, teamwork, clinical skills, competence, and professional identity, and encourage student storytelling through photos.

Students preparing for their dissertations face several obstacles and challenges before they can even think about the writing. Well-meant support and guidance can be overwhelming or confusing out of context. A process diagram cuts through the morass of instruction to offer a clear route through to completion, but existing examples do not necessarily give students the actionable insights they need to navigate the research process. Björn Praestegaard Larsen aims to remedy this by creating a research-informed visual model that takes students through from the initiation of their research to its completion. One of the most significant contributions of this model is in its pacing out of the stages so that students can manage their time more easily through transparency of tasks.

Students in professional fields often struggle to translate their academic knowledge and skills into effective practices while on placement. To address this challenge, Reece Sohdi's research utilised a Design-Based Research approach to develop structured 'passports' for learners. These passports were utilised within existing mentoring and training structures, providing learners with structured reflection and infographics to consolidate their theoretical learning for application in placement. Sohdi's findings from this approach draw out learning and applications for other professional programmes.

The first case study in the collection highlights the potential use of escape rooms within a counselling context to support student belonging and foster communication skills. Sonja Hann, Marie-Luise Springmann, Tamara Denninger and Mechthild Kiegelmann highlight the adaptability of escape rooms and how gamification can support roleplay scenarios between students. A mixed methods evaluation is presented involving first year students undertaking a course on counselling skills. Authors reflect on how they have adapted the escape room activities over time to support online, in person and hybrid versions of the game and provide recommendations for others looking to implement similar activities within their own teaching practice.

The case study presented by Wendy Haw and Adam Crawford provides insight into the use of hackathons to support university-level water curricula for students in minority communities. The authors demonstrate that hackathons can be used to support student data literacy, inter-disciplinary learning, critical thinking and effective communication. Evaluation of three hackathons show the potential for hackathons to bridge disciplines and get people with varying skillsets to work on problems. The authors argue that hackathons

therefore present an opportunity to foster social mobility by providing hands-on upskilling opportunities in areas that are desirable for future careers. The case study also reinforces the importance of mentorship and role models to encourage participation.

Students from widening participation backgrounds are often disadvantaged in their search for degree-level employment following graduation, as they are often less likely to be able to take up opportunities outside the curriculum that are designed to develop their employability skills. In our second case study, Georgy Petrov outlines a new approach for embedding critical employability skills into the curriculum by moving a Business Management course from a traditional lecture-seminar model to smaller group workshops. Using project-based learning based on live briefs from external employers, students developed their capabilities around critical reflection as well as professional skills such as decision-making and communication. At the end of the module, they reported much greater confidence in these areas previously of concern.

Despite a sincere and sustained development towards more inclusive learning and teaching practices over the past decade, Angelos Bakogiannis contends in our first opinion piece that there remains a lingering gap between theory and practice. In calling for actionable guidance for EAP practitioners and learning developers, he identifies the need for a comprehensive policy framework that transforms educational research and recommendations into concrete steps and context-specific strategies. But how can this be achieved? For Bakogiannis, the answer lies in collaboration between policymakers, researchers, and educational developers, to create a professional development programme designed to meet the needs of all educators. Learning developers have a valuable role in this, not only as beneficiaries of such training, but also in acting as a dynamic and responsive connection between theory and practice, interpreting policy and research into effective classroom strategies.

Multimodal assignments are those which incorporate a range of audio/visual formats to help conceptualise new and varied ways of making meaning. In our second opinion piece, the complex interactions necessitated by this pedagogical approach are mirrored in the collaboration of three third space professionals at Mount Royal University, Canada: a librarian, a learning developer, and an educational developer. Together, they mapped out the boundaries of their roles and identified significant areas of overlap in how they supported staff and students with these assessments, and used this holistic approach to

create a Multimodal Assignment Design Workshop, based on an assignment lifecycle approach and providing a practice-based solution to an emerging need.

According to Lee Fallin and Catherine Turton, Design Thinking (DT) has the potential to significantly enhance Learning Development and remains under-utilised. By bringing in key learning from DT, the learning process can be transformed through such techniques as incorporating empathy for the learner into the practice; using creative prompts to provoke divergent and convergent thinking; problematising problems and then exploring solutions; and creating quick, physical prototypes. The mindset adopted enables learners to 'fail fast' and tolerate ambiguity rather than seeking simplistic answers. The authors reflect on the adoption of DT at the University of Hull, and its value in partnership working by and with students, and encourage others to embrace DT in LD.

Finally, in her opinion piece, Chahna Gonsalves proposes an expanded theoretical framework for contextual learning to address the limitations of authentic assessment in the face of generative AI's rapid advancements. Whilst the framework is primarily theoretical and not yet empirically validated, it offers a new way of thinking about assessment design, providing educators with a vocabulary and conceptual tools to create more resilient and effective assessments. By integrating diverse contexts into assessment design, this framework promotes higher-order thinking and real-world applications to make assessments more adaptable to the complexities of modern professional environments.

The articles in this collection close with a brief communication by Nuria Lopez and Søren Baltzer Rasmussen. Small changes can often make a significant difference, assert the authors, particularly when educators have time to reflect on alternative approaches. Their Implementation Template creates space for teachers and learning developers to consider the 'pedagogical patterns' they tend to follow and whether these can be enhanced in support of student learning. Covering session aims, potential challenges, and means for evaluation, the Template also foregrounds the benefits of peer support through conversation, with the aim of creating communities of practice focused on the refinement of teaching design through shared professional perspectives and experiences. Intended to be iterative, the Implementation Template is a structured and supportive tool for all educators to build opportunities for collaboration with peers while reviewing and revising their teaching.

In this issue's book reviews section, four authors examine a range of recent works that learning developers and higher education practitioners will find compelling.

Ryan Arthur contextualises Paul Campbell's *Race and assessment in higher education: from conceptualising barriers to making measurable change* (2024) within the wider race awarding gap (RAG) literature. The book provides advice on identifying and tackling racial exclusions and barriers to assessment, drawing on Campbell's experience developing interventions to reduce the RAG. Arthur suggests the approaches recommended by Campbell stretch the status quo as far as possible, recommending the book as a landmark text because of how it brings together wider approaches to tackling the RAG in a cohesive and compelling way. Arthur hopes that the book will encourage the development of more far-reaching activities as part of the wider package needed to address the RAG.

Steve Barfield and Alan Ali Saeed have reviewed the second edition of *Using digital humanities in the classroom: a practical introduction for teachers, lecturers, and students* (2022) by Claire Battershill and Shawna Ross. Their review emphasises that the digital humanities should not be understood as a specific field, but rather as a broader approach that will appeal to educators across the higher education sector. Barfield and Saeed commend the practical advice offered by the text, which foregrounds a flexible and inclusive approach to the digital humanities. Whilst acknowledging that some digital humanities approaches may appear unfamiliar to educators – particularly those working in countries marked by 'digital poverty' – the reviewers suggest that events such as the COVID-19 pandemic demonstrate how learning the basics of digital humanities will act as a sensible precaution for whatever the future may hold.

In his review of *Blended learning solutions in higher education: history, theory, and practice* (2024) by Neil Hughes, Gary Fisher draws attention to the book's compelling critique of blended learning's assumed effectiveness and its variability of implementation across the higher education sector. Fisher notes how the book's case studies reveal the inherent limitations of transferring results across diverse and disparate educational contexts. He argues that the book's introduction of the MIRACLE framework will provide educators with a valuable tool to guide the design, implementation, and assessment of blended learning strategies.

Finally, Kim Pedersen and Anne-Marie Langford offer a review of Josh Thorpe's *AI for students: creative hacks for academic success: an illustrated guide* (2024), noting the ways Thorpe combined his expertise and practical knowledge to support students in navigating the use of generative AI to support their studies. They find that the bite-sized chapters offer a gentle and playful approach to engaging with generative AI, meaning the comic-style text is likely to appeal to busy students – especially those transitioning into higher education study. Whilst they suggest that the book could provide a more critical focus on certain issues – particularly around bias, intellectual property, and environmental impact – they feel Thorpe has offered a useful starting point for engagement with AI technologies.

In closing, we wish to thank our reviewers, whose expertise and constructive critiques have elevated the quality of the works published in this volume. Their continued dedication to facilitating good scholarship is the foundation of our scholarly community. Our heartfelt appreciation goes to:

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We hope that our journal's mission to champion excellence while nurturing emerging voices comes through on the pages of this issue. In this spirit, we invite our readers to immerse themselves in work that both challenges and expands their thinking of, with each piece contributing to the evolving dialogue in our field.

With very best wishes,

Alicja Syska

*JLDHE* Editorial Board

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

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