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Daniel Fridberg and Amy Benians

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LEARNING DESIGN: CREATING CONDITIONS FOR LEARNING

Daniel Fridberg and Amy Benians

Learning design begins with an inherent challenge: we cannot make a learner learn. We can explain, demonstrate, question, organise resources, provide feedback, and create opportunities to practise. We can do our best to remove some barriers, yet the question remains: how can we transfer knowledge intact from a teacher to a learner (and vice versa), or guarantee that a carefully designed activity will be experienced exactly as we intend? The skill set and knowledge required to improve our chances of achieving this are what make Learning Design an emerging profession in its own right.

Since learning cannot be guaranteed, learning design involves creating the optimal conditions in which it becomes more accessible, possible, and meaningful. These conditions integrate cognitive, emotional, and relational ingredients. First, on the cognitive side, learners need to connect new ideas with prior knowledge, manage complexity, consolidate understanding, and apply it in unfamiliar situations, appropriate to the level of their studies. On the emotional level, learners need to feel safe, supported, and appreciated. On the social level, learners need to be recognised for their social capital, their identities, and their unique contribution to the learning environment. Learning design may therefore be understood as the intentional organisation of tasks, resources, environments, and interactions, coupled with a willingness to revise those arrangements in response to experiences (Bennett et al., 2017; Goodyear, 2015).

The seven contributions in this special issue of *Scope (Learning and Teaching)* approach learning design from different angles. They move between theory and practice, reflection and empirical evaluation, Aotearoa New Zealand and international contexts, and face-to-face versus digitally mediated and simulated environments. Collectively, they review the different dimensions shaping the practice of learning design.

RELATIONAL AND TIRITI-GROUNDED DESIGN

Terri Brian and Jody Takimoana ground the special issue's relational and ethical foundation in "Te Ako Tētahi ki Tētahi Learning From One Another: The Power of Ako," through a recorded dialogue they conducted. Their kōrero explores key concepts around ako (reciprocal learning and teaching pedagogy in the Māori tradition), whanaungatanga (kinship-like relationships), mātauranga (knowledge) and tuākana-tēina (older-younger sibling) relations as interconnected components for learning design in Aotearoa. In this article, they discuss the dialogical form of learning design, starting with how understanding develops through questions, to clarification and movement between the positions of ākonga and kaiako. Ako, they argue, should not be reduced to the observation that educators occasionally learn from students. Rather, expertise is distributed and

roles may shift according to context. That is, kaiako retain pedagogical responsibilities without becoming the sole source of legitimate knowledge, while ākonga bring experiences and cultural understandings capable of extending or challenging what educators know (Pere, 1994).

Since such reciprocity depends on establishing whanaungatanga, and fostering relationships requires time and space, it cannot merely be listed among a course's values while in practice every opportunity for connection is missed in the interests of content coverage. Thus, relational pedagogy's value partly lies in making disagreement sustainable without making the relationship disposable (Berryman et al., 2018). Brian and Takimoana connect this work with te Tiriti partnership and with questions of power; that is, whose knowledge is foundational, who is expected to speak, and who is positioned as expert.

Rachael Burke's "Supporting International Tertiary Students in Aotearoa New Zealand Through Building Relationships and Fostering Belonging" translates these principles into teacher-education suggested guidelines, such as learning names accurately, sharing significant objects and life maps, introducing support staff face to face, and creating peer-learning relationships. These, she suggests, should be learning design decisions rather than congenial extras. Drawing on slow pedagogy and Māori models of wellbeing, Burke argues that belonging is a condition of participation. Specifically, Durie's Te Whare Tapa Whā framework (1994) broadens the design frame by treating physical, emotional, spiritual, and relational and cultural wellbeing as interconnected dimensions of readiness to learn.

COHERENCE, KNOWLEDGE, AND LEARNER EXPERIENCE

Roseanne Sadd, Colleen Reilly, Shirley Lyford, and Te Aniwa Wakem examine how ākonga perceive and experience the Bachelor of Nursing in "Students' Perspectives on a Bicultural Virtual Whānau: Advancing Te Tiriti o Waitangi in Nursing Curricula." In their learning design, learners are introduced to fictitious family members (whānau) who recur across simulations, tutorials, and assessments through successive years of the programme. As learning design artefacts, developing health narratives connect otherwise segmented curriculum elements and reduce the need to process an entirely unfamiliar situation in each activity, allowing ākonga to focus on increasingly complex clinical reasoning.

The study demonstrates why learning design must be evaluated from more than one standpoint. While ākonga generally regarded the virtual whānau as clinically realistic and useful, ākonga Māori identified stereotyping, the marginalisation of tikanga in task-focused simulations, the frequent absence of whānau relationships, and insufficient attention to whakapapa, hapū, iwi and regional difference. However, the authors argue that these findings do not cancel the learning design's educational value but rather confirm and help progress its evolution. That is, a resource which supports clinical reasoning but suffers from cultural inclusion incompleteness may still be revised rather than dismissed, evidenced by ākonga voice—especially the voices of those represented—as a normal quality improvement process.

Amy Benians and Katherine Danaher turn to knowledge formation in "Designing for Schema Development: Integrating Learning Theory and Neuroscience." Their starting question of how the schema concept can be useful in learning design is particularly timely: if learners increasingly use generative artificial intelligence (GenAI) to produce explanations and solve problems, what knowledge enables them to evaluate those outputs? The authors resist a simple pendulum swing

from constructivist learning back to memorisation and lectures. Instead, they argue, utilising schemata brings cognitivist and constructivist perspectives into the learning design conversation (Ertmer & Newby, 2013). Schemata organise knowledge and set expectations, but remain open to elaboration and revision. This supports practices such as activating prior knowledge, managing cognitive load, retrieval, spacing, experience, prediction, comparison, and reflection. Thus, foundational knowledge and critical thinking are not alternatives to each other but complementary skills in which critical judgement builds on sufficiently developed knowledge against which claims can be assessed.

PRACTITIONER JUDGEMENT AND TECHNOLOGICAL MEDIATION

Clare Morton's "The Dual Role of Facilitator and Learning Designer: Design Decisions and Blind Spots" turns attention to the practitioner. A facilitator who also designs for learning has valuable proximity to content, ākonga, and the teaching context, and can adjust pacing or representation in response to what occurs. However, Morton suggests, proximity can also conceal complexity, encourage excessive content, and allow intuition to stand in for evidence. Morton therefore argues for explicit design principles, transparent peer review, and organisational provision of time and professional support. Her practical workshop demonstrates how social constructivism, cognitive load theory, Universal Design for Learning, whanaungatanga, and ako may inform sequence, visual representation, shared activity, and reflection.

Sahar Chaer and Ghina Albadawi widen the context in "Designing AI-Supported Flipped Professional Development for Teachers." Developed in Lebanon during wartime disruption, their learning design model connects asynchronous preparation, synchronous learning interaction, and structured reflection. Digital platforms and GenAI-supported prompts serve differing functions within a deliberately sequenced framework. In this research, participants reported positive experiences of the asynchronous resources, live sessions, and flipped structure. However, since without baseline data or a comparable non-AI condition, the study cannot isolate GenAI's specific contribution; its significance lies instead in showing how technology may be intentionally bounded and placed within a coherent professional-learning design. This cautious interpretation of the authors is important where technological novelty can encourage claims that outrun available evidence (Miao & Holmes, 2023).

Jerrylynn Manuel closes the collection by asking, "Can Generative Artificial Intelligence Help Scale Instructional Coaching?" In her view, instructional coaching is relational and iterative, built on observation, personalised feedback, dialogue, and reflection. These qualities, she argues, help explain both its educational value and its cost. Manuel considers whether GenAI might provide automated feedback or support self-directed reflection, while remaining appropriately balanced. Although AI-generated feedback may be immediate and accessible, human feedback is more likely to be contextually grounded. Thus, the two may be valued for different purposes rather than functioning as substitutes (Henderson et al., 2025). GenAI might contribute to a differentiated support system, but human validation and professional judgement must remain available. Manuel concludes that scaling support is worthwhile only if efficiency does not remove the relationships and contextual understanding that made the support valuable.

CONCLUSION

Across the collection, learning design emerges as a practice of balancing: between new information and prior knowledge, culture and curriculum, planning and learner responsiveness, and digital resources and human relationships. To that extent, prior knowledge matters, but so does how that knowledge is recognised. Sequence matters, but so does responsiveness; reflection matters, but must be supported rather than merely requested. Technology may extend access and participation, but may also displace judgement or conceal new barriers; and perhaps most importantly, relationship building is not an add-on to the supposedly real work of cognition in learning but rather a core practice, which helps create the conditions in which learners take risks, offer interpretations, and revise their understanding.

Learning design is therefore not the production of perfect experiences. It is a methodological and relational practice of creating, examining, and revising the conditions offered to learners. It requires evidence interpreted in context, plans open to adaptation, and innovation answerable to educational and human purposes. We cannot ensure that learning happens. We can, however, influence what learners are invited to do, whose knowledge they encounter, and the resources, relationships, and forms of participation available to them. As these articles suggest, this is not merely a modest claim but an educational responsibility of the learning designer.

Daniel Fridberg (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-8771-9170) joined Te Ama Ako | Learning and Teaching development team at Otago Polytechnic in September 2018. Before this, he was a researcher and practitioner of peacebuilding processes. His research spans areas of Learning and Teaching such as Learning Design and AI as well as peacebuilding, dialogue, and social solidarity in challenged democracies.

Amy Benians (https://orcid.org/0000-0001-7600-6837) has been a Learning and Teaching Specialist with Te Ama Ako, Otago Polytechnic, since August 2018. She worked previously as a research scientist, scientific writer and learning designer, in the UK and New Zealand. Her research interests include developing adult learners' literacy and numeracy skills, supporting neurodivergent learners and keeping abreast with advances in the neuroscience of learning.

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