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COLUMN: DESIGN DIALOGUES

Critical and Creative Methods: From Learning Design Practice To Research

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Abstract

This commentary details the experiences of an interprofessional collective with a shared interest in learning design in higher education. In building collaborations across our institutional boundaries in Ireland and the United Kingdom, we share insights for developing an emerging critical and creative research identity through the lived experience of learning design practice. With a common goal to progress instructional design and technology research beyond its current boundaries, we encourage practitioners and researchers to work together fluidly to shape our field for more socially just postdigital learning futures.

Keywords Creative · Critical · Design · Open · Postdigital · Practice · Research

> "Remember to imagine and craft the worlds you cannot live without, just as you dismantle the ones you cannot live within".
>
> — Ruha Benjamin

Recognising and including practitioners in the instructional design and technology field as valuable contributors to research can create opportunities for more meaningful, practice-informed scholarship. Empowering practitioners to lead research — through critical and creative methodologies common in daily practice — informs a research paradigm that centres values such as creativity, collaboration, openness and care. The broader field of educational technology research is often narrowly focused on praxis, with research recommendations being made *for* practitioners rather than *by* practitioners (Curry, 2024; Peacock & Digges-Elliott, 2025; Reeves & Lin, 2020).

Our Collective Approach to Learning Design

The adoption of critical and creative approaches to instructional design can address the inherent messiness and complexities of digital learning. This approach ensures we are both conscious of the boundaries set by our institutional contexts, and the practicalities integral to our day-to-day work. Through striking a balance between progress and critique, it is possible to support education technology adoption in higher education, and beyond, while also fostering critical reflection and inquiry such as:

- **Design activities** that encourage deep reflection, curious discussion and often uncomfortable realisations.
- **Scrutinise the apps and tools** used in practice, challenge popular beliefs and narratives and examine the impact of our educational technology practices in higher education and beyond.
- **Move conversations** past digital education adoption and transformation to acknowledge the wider-reaching complexities and complications embedded in educational technologies.
- **Draw on critical research** that examines the education technology industry and its wider impact on society and our practice while amplifying insights from both students and colleagues.

While we are deeply committed to our values, we acknowledge that instructional designers often struggle to share the insights we have gained in practice. Commonly

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in these roles, there is a prevalent yet unofficial rule that research, writing and scholarship should take place outside of working hours. The "unspoken hierarchy within academia" and professional standing of instructional designers can also render insights "seemingly inconsequential" (Dave in Mitchell et al., 2025, p. 9). Conversely, academic staff encounter an ever-present pressure to publish in high-ranking journals that often exclude practitioners. Together, we draw inspiration from open education practitioners like Cronin and Czerniewicz (2023) who challenge and resist "dominant narratives [and] to inspire the production of new visions" (p. 43). We hope to lead by example to encourage and empower practitioners to engage in the research process as a collective, knowledge generation and sharing activity. We model our values by publishing generative open educational resources created in practice and subverting traditional writing practices by adopting a unified voice. Our approach amplifies marginalised voices through open practice "in order to engage imaginatively with the rapidly shifting terrain of digital education" (Ross, 2017, p. 215).

This commentary takes up the call from the *Design Dialogues* column to showcase practitioner voices as co-authors rather than subjects, highlighting the value of experience gained through practice for a wide range of readers and stakeholders. In this spirit, as an interprofessional collective of practitioners and researchers with a common focus on learning design, we explore the progression of the instructional designer's journey from practitioner to emerging researcher. We aim to consider alternative futures for our field, examining what the field *could* be beyond its current state and by unsettling its boundaries. Together, we acknowledge the significant and often untapped value of practitioner voices in the leading of research and share insights into our collective and considered reflections on the "latent learning design superpowers" that inform our professional and academic practice (Costello et al., 2022, p. 472).

Practice-Based Superpowers

Superpowers are only as strong as the sum of our diverse, embodied skills. Instructional design practice and experience can vary widely based on conditions such as context, sector, and geographic location. Our collective professional practice stems largely from experience in higher education in Ireland and the United Kingdom. In these settings, we have been afforded agency to experiment with methods such as zine making, speculative fiction and futuring methods. In our work, we have broadly supported digital, online, and open learning in higher education. We share significant experience and insights based on our support of colleagues in their teaching and learning practice. We recognise that our contact time with colleagues is both valuable and temporally bound. Therefore, we move beyond conventional modalities to model methods that foster caring and engaging learning communities. These methods allow us to centre participants' voices in hands-on, generative work that can be built upon and shared more widely. However, we also draw on more traditional methods in our work, such as implementing design thinking and ABC learning design processes for the agile development of open, online courses on topics like open practice and digital competencies (Molloy et al., 2022; Ní Shé et al., 2021).

We share outputs and artefacts globally — often under Creative Commons licenses — across blogs, social media accounts and open repositories. Open educational practice underpins our work, and indeed it is that open sharing across our various networks that brought us together. While we acknowledge that the impetus to adopt open practice is often a personal choice, informed by available support, we encourage others to be confident in reaching out to like-minded colleagues outside of their immediate environments as the rich interactions that happen around shared content can have lasting individual and collective impact (Collier & Ross, 2017; Cronin, 2017). In short, open content sharing forms part of open educational practice which can lead to open communities and collectives (Nascimbeni et al., 2024).

With openness as an integral part of our practice, we are sustained by various networks and collaborations beyond the confines of our institutional contexts. We work together in various ways, including co-authoring, facilitating workshops and as research partners. However, we also acknowledge the complications intrinsic to open practice, especially in its potential to marginalise voices and perpetuate closures (Bayne et al., 2015). We work within our networks to challenge our own beliefs and the prevailing assumptions within our field. For example, against a rush of GenAI advancements and the accompanying, unrelenting techno-optimistic discourse, our approach has enabled us to challenge rapid GenAI adoption in higher education through critical questioning and creative expression. We continue to create, curate and share meaningful work in the spirit of community and collective good. We focus on "embodied community" through our facilitation and draw upon a "make-think-feel" approach, centring both materiality and connection (Piepmeier, 2009, p. 18; Rodriguez Castro, 2025, p. 8). In workshop settings that are mostly analogue and hands-on, we facilitate lively conversations and connections. We come away with artefacts that can be fashioned into digital resources — capturing fleeting, ephemeral moments to give them permanency and lasting purpose. For example, workshop outputs created as physical artefacts, which are then digitised for sharing; our zines are created from reused ephemera (Thomson & Molloy, 2025).

Gently resisting dominant narratives and privileging the lived experiences of our participants is both restorative and

Fig. 1 Scanned zine created by a participant at a recent workshop, "Embedding sustainability literacies in postdigital learning design", which took place in February 2025 at the Education after the algorithm: Co-designing critical and creative futures symposium in Dublin City University, Ireland (Thomson & Molloy, 2025)

endemic to our collective practice. Adopting methods that have roots in counter-culture movements has enabled us to develop our design approaches beyond traditional norms and leverage our collective activism to inform a postdigital learning design approach that can "actively contribute to the transformation of society" (Carvalho & Yeoman, 2023, p. 5). Postdigital learning design as a method defies simple categorisation, encompassing a range of binaries within the postdigital from "messy; unpredictable; digital and analog; technological and non-technological; biological and informational" (Jandrić et al., 2018, p. 895). We regard our broader networks as restorative spaces, continuing to draw inspiration from movements like the #FemEdTech community and the collaborative and critical scholarship it has influenced, which centres care and relational modes over transactional, individualistic or instrumentalist ones (Beetham et al., 2022; Drumm et al., 2024).

Broadly speaking, our motivation stems from a collective desire to design digital learning futures using values-centred, pragmatic approaches underpinned by care (Bali et al., 2025). In short, our intrinsic and extrinsic motivations are not mutually exclusive. For example, sharing open educational resources benefits the wider field of instructional design and scholarship, while also providing us with metrics and citations. With common goals, we have had many opportunities to build on collaborations in meaningful and practical ways. For example, we have detailed elsewhere how instructional design practitioners might consider leveraging practice-based methods in research spaces to develop an emerging research identity (Molloy & Thomson, 2023, 2024). Instructional designers often exist in liminal spaces between academic and professional services in higher education, which can blur and undermine their status within the institution. This can be further compounded by the "disembodied skills-based constructions of learning designers" in job descriptions (Costello et. al., 2022, p. 460). Research and publication duties are often of low priority in busy institutions, and there is often no "workload allocation for research" in these roles (Mitchell & Bugden, 2023, para. 18). The lead author of this paper recently found herself living this reality. University work was busier than she anticipated at the 'quiet point' in the summer that she had allocated time to write this paper. She realised that it was necessary to take annual leave and fully divest from work. The process for doing so was more involved than expected, involving fully dismantling and storing away her employer-issued laptop and docking station, deleting work related apps on personal devices and even creating rules within Outlook to filter out unnecessary distractions. The tensions between research and practice are realities to be lived as much as they are problems to be solved.

Toward an Emerging Research Identity

We propose that practitioners purposefully blur boundaries between research and practice spaces. This may entail

Fig. 2 Scanned workshop notes curated into a digital zine based on the workshop, "Humanising learning design with digital pragmatism", which took place at the OER 24 Conference in Cork, Ireland (Thomson & Molloy, 2024)

reading research papers both to examine methodologies as much as findings, or considering how practice-based methods could be leveraged as future research methodologies. Reflecting on zine making as a methodology, Biagioli et al. (2021) suggest that a purely text-based approach can leave out the "more holistic expressions of an experience that can inform a study about the effects of a certain process or environment or grouping on the human beings involved" (p. 173). The development of artefacts as data points in research methodologies can be duplicated in practice, and we chose to embrace zines in practice as "visual, tactile, three-dimensional forms of accounting for experience through artistic responses, design propositions and textual notations to provide a tangible and holistic modelling of an experience or a problem and how to move forward from it" (Biagioli et al., 2021, p. 173). In both spaces, zine making facilitates the tangible expression of lived experiences to facilitate questioning of accepted norms and can provide

a critical and creative lens for both practice and research (see Figs. 1 and 2).

Drawing on speculative and futuring methods equips us to "produce findings and conclusions which are generative enough to serve as invitations for further work, and indeed to offer insights for educational practice" (Ross, 2016, p. 227). Such methods also create spaces in both practice and research for community building, articulating a collective voice for resistance against hegemonic norms in higher education (French & Curd, 2021; Houlden & Veletsianos, 2023; Watson et al., 2025). For example, participants can be invited to write postcards to their future colleagues/self to imagine ways that we might address broad concepts such as degrowth in digital learning (Molloy, 2024). We challenge the dominant, techno-deterministic discourse that obfuscates many more pressing issues. For example, student interns on the Irish Universities Association's *Enhancing Digital Teaching and Learning* project created speculative vignettes for the Irish higher education context in the near-future, 2042 (Flynn et al., 2023). Macgilchrist & Costello (2023) detailed student visions for higher education futures using a fully mapped out course based on the Africanfuturist science fiction novella, *Binti*. In these chapters, future visions for higher education were convivial, socially just and inclusive. These speculative approaches include a diversity of voices — colleagues, researchers, and students. They help us to shape both practice and research moving forward. These generative findings shed light on the prevailing issues and challenges that we should be addressing in both research and practice. Informed by our collective activism, we ask our readers and participants if they are "content to be defined by the research of the past?" (Curry, 2024, p. 846). We propose hopeful "futures-in-the-making" to "avoid despair in the here-and-now" (Atenas et al., 2022).

The Praxis of Instructional Design Practice and Research

We conclude that the past *cannot* define us, especially in the current context. These are complex times, and our work must respond to that, acknowledging that educational technology research often provides guidance *to* practitioners, examining "what practitioners are doing in the field through the lens of the researchers" (Peacock & Digges-Elliott, 2025, p. 258). It is our view that the praxis of instructional design practice and research should amplify the valuable voices of practitioners in instructional design research, highlighting how practice and lived experience can augment the research field more broadly. In documenting these "new histories", we provide guidance for adopting critical and creative methods (Clark-Stallkamp et al., 2022, p. 92). It is our common goal to address the "grand challenges" present in our field via a wider contextual lens (Moore et al., 2025, p. 498). We also encourage the reader to seek out a diversity of perspectives and influences beyond the dominant voices in this research field (e.g., Green et al., 2023; Ramparsad Banwari et al., 2023; Roberts et al., 2023; Romero-Hall, 2022).

This commentary provides insights into our collective practice, demonstrating how emerging research careers and academic partnerships can be built and supported. By acknowledging the barriers to research and publication in the instructional design field, we offer a reflective lens that we hope can inspire instructional designers to move between practice and research with more confidence (Peacock & Digges-Elliott, 2025).

Our experience working at the intersection of instructional design practice and research has equipped us to explore the "not-yetness" of shifting roles and how these blurred lines might be leveraged into unique research approaches based on practical experience (Collier & Ross, 2017). We encourage researchers to embrace methods developed in instructional design practice and include practitioners as co-authors to help push the boundaries in our field if we aim to expand it (Curry, 2024). There is significant value in the boundary-pushing practices and lived experiences of instructional designers, and we propose that this work can inform a new paradigm of [post]digital learning design through partnership, engaging in "hopeful act[s] that we express to each other and to our material realities" (Costello, 2024, p. 4).

Data Availability Not applicable.

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