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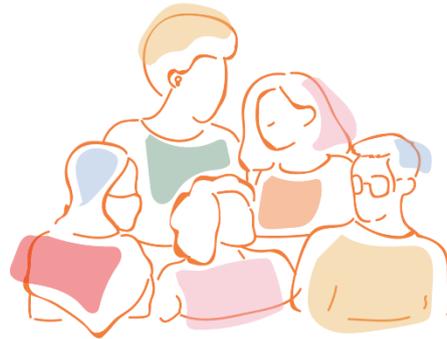
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## LEARNING DESIGN VOICES

### PREPRINT

## Open learning designers on the margins

by Verena Roberts, Leo Havemann & Helen DeWaard

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# Open learning designers on the margins

by Verena Roberts, Leo Havemann & Helen DeWaard

## Chapter in brief

Prior to the global COVID-19 pandemic, learning designers and adjacent professionals worked closely with educators to develop technologically supported and enhanced learning opportunities – often particularly within online education spaces, though increasingly also in blended learning contexts. In the rush of pandemic mitigation, educational equity fault lines were exposed and exacerbated, as classroom-based teaching was rapidly redeployed into online and digital spaces. The authors offer this chapter as a reflection of their work as learning designers, but also as practitioners of open education, as part of a necessary collective effort to do better, through the open sharing of strategies, discoveries, questions and uncertainties. Here we propose the application of the concept of third space to illuminate the position of learning designers in higher education, especially as they attempt to navigate and negotiate a practice of open(ing) learning design that is intentional, equitable and reflective. Third space is explored as both a site of identity-building for learning designers and as a challenging, liminal, boundary-spanning location for learning design practice. We share some principles of open learning design and learner readiness. We share a contextual application for learning that prioritises students in the learning equation. As learning designers, we suggest that, to engage and inspire learning, our practice must be grounded on ethical considerations for human care, equity, criticality and openness.

**Keywords:** open education, learning design, learning designers, third space, reflective practice, intentionality

## **Introduction**

Is there such a thing as open learning design – and if so, are its practitioners marginal? To give these questions due consideration we must first turn to a discussion of the contexts in which we are asking these questions. First of all, this writing originates in the “late-pandemic” moment (March – August 2021), widely discussed as an inflection point in higher education’s complicated relationship with online learning. Added to this is the acknowledgement that our own institutional, professional and personal contexts, including our work in learning design and our identities as open education researchers and practitioners, have afforded us particular lenses to examine these issues, and suggest to us that context is part of the answer.

While the COVID-19 pandemic is not the main focus of this chapter, we must note that our writing took place at a time when educators around the world were seemingly emerging from an extended phase of ‘pandemic pedagogy’, by which we mean emergency-response forms of teaching and learning using remote or hybrid methods (Barbour et al., 2020; Havemann & Roberts, 2021; Williamson et al., 2020), or cases in which learning and teaching remained impacted by pandemic mitigation effects. In many cases, “moving on” took the shape of moving back into the campus and classroom, with little room for nuanced discussions of the relative strengths of digital, analogue, synchronous and asynchronous modes, let alone the possibilities and value of openness.

There is a danger that the memory of the considerable personal and workload pressures and challenges of this overwhelming period, combined with the frequently negative portrayal of the results by governments, media and sometimes even institutions themselves, will come to overshadow other significant aspects that much could yet be learned from within learning design contexts. Without wishing to minimise this (ongoing) impact on colleagues and students, we nonetheless cannot endorse the widespread calls to return to some halcyon, analogue, pre-COVID days of “normal”. As Ladson-Billings (2021) notes, “normal is where the problems reside” (p. 69); she calls instead for a “hard re-set”, a “rethink and redesign” of teaching and learning environments and curricula (p. 73). The socioeconomic and educational fault lines which the crisis has exposed cannot simply be papered over by a return to “room-enhanced” learning. It is not, in short, simply a question of whether to return to “normal”, or retain “what worked” in the pandemic pivot. Instead, we should now be learning from our mistakes and doing better.

One promising feature emerging from the pandemic response has been an apparent increase in the opening of educational practices beyond the usual suspects, as educators finding their feet in remote teaching shared new strategies, discoveries, questions and uncertainties (Biernat et al., 2020; Havemann & Roberts, 2021). We have been heartened to witness, support and participate in this opening of educator peer-to-peer discussion of learning and teaching practice (in itself, an aspect of what we are calling “open learning design”). We are also aware that this opening perhaps invites, but does not automatically lead to, learning designs which incorporate adoption, adaptation and/or creation of open educational resources (OER), as well as affordances to design for open teaching and learning. It is particularly that latter idea of open learning design that we will focus on in this chapter, although this is only one of various senses in which learning design can be open(ed). We also propose that the concept of “third space” (Bhabha, 1994; Soja, 1996) can help us to interpret the role of the open learning designer as one that honours and advocates

for equity, diversity, and inclusion of marginalised learners within higher education learning contexts. We will explore what an intentional, reflective and open approach to learning design might offer, exploring angles on the idea of openness that this phrase evokes, as well as reflecting upon the recent shifts in (and sharper focus on) learning design following the distinctive, disruptive and traumatising context of the pandemic.

In order to think through the notion of open learning design, we will first turn to learning design and designers, and consider how such a role can be said to occupy a third space in higher education. We then discuss some ways in which conventional understandings of these labels are potentially altered or troubled by aspects of openness. We will discuss the use of open learning environments (e.g. open syllabi), open engagement (e.g. blogs, Twitter chat), and alternative assessments through integrating blogging, social media and reflexive practices (DeWaard and Roberts, 2021; Shelton et al., 2020), as well as how open education shapes our practice. In addition, we will consider the open readiness of learners and scaffolding of intentional, reflective and open learning practices.

## **Learning design and learning designers**

Learning design is often used as a synonym of instructional design; and in both cases the discussion usually concerns the design of online (and sometimes blended-mode) courses. Learning design is often thought of as an inclusive, participatory process, situated in and responsive to contexts, and can thus include but expand upon the range of activities usually referred to as “instructional design”, which tends to imply the application of technical, templated and replicable methodologies to course design. Learning design can be understood as an alternative vision of what is involved, needed or indeed “designed”; rather than emphasising the design of online instruction (in order to replace the “absent” teacher), learning processes and learners are more explicitly centred, although the idea that learning can be designed is sometimes questioned. For Dalziel et al. (2016), the use of the term “learning design” indicates that “an educator can carefully design teaching and learning activities that encourage learning to take place” (p. 21), rather than design learning itself.

Learning design is described as a professional craft focusing on the description and conveyance of productive approaches, in efforts to create, produce, evaluate and improve teaching and learning (Dalziel et al., 2016; Wagner, 2021). Dalziel et al. (2016) propose a learning design framework encompassing core concepts of representation, guidance and sharing in the pursuit of good pedagogy. The field of learning design reframes the history, traditions and research from related fields of study such as instructional design, user experience design, learner experience design, design thinking, and learning engineering (Wagner, 2021).

Learning designers work to develop necessary conditions, apply strategies, and build resources and tools while navigating platforms to engage and inspire learners (Wagner, 2021). Essential qualities for learning designers include understanding of human learning and of design principles (Wagner, 2021), as well as the embodiment of the principle that course design is more than content delivery (Dalziel et al., 2016). In addition, we contend that the roles, skills and expectations for learning designers should also include ethical considerations for human care, equity, criticality and openness – but then, who is a learning designer?

Instructional design usually implies the existence of an “instructional designer”, a specialist in applying appropriate methods in course design; whereas, whoever does learning design is understood to be a learning designer – which is less of a case of a person owning the role and typically acknowledged as a collaborative output of a range of people (particularly teachers/lecturers), usually working alongside or supported by specialists in educational technology or instructional/learning design. While none of these educators or specialists are necessarily officially known as learning designers, we should also note that (in the UK and Canada, at least) explicitly named “learning designer” job titles, referencing roles for online learning design specialists, were already increasing prior to the pandemic. This trend seems to have been accelerated by the crisis, as institutions sought to rapidly increase their capacity to move campus-based courses online.

In this chapter, with the context of the pandemic pivot online in mind, when we discuss learning designers, we are mostly talking about online learning specialists (whatever their actual job title), acting in a supportive or collaborative role in relation to academic staff who generally had little prior exposure to teaching online.

At this point, it is relevant to delve further into our own contexts and experiences of learning design work. Our open learning designer identities have evolved in similar yet different ways:

**Leo:** I have never been a learning designer by job title, but throughout a range of roles in teaching, librarianship and digital education, my work has often involved designing and facilitating learning experiences: mostly online, often via unassessed activities as well as assignments, and through interaction with people as well as with information, sometimes making use of open practices. More recently I have had some experience facilitating ABC Learning Design (storyboarding) workshops, in which participants gain an overview of learning design concepts and begin to plan the mix and sequencing of activity types they will employ in their course.

**Helen:** I became a learning designer in the technology support unit within a faculty of education in a large Canadian university when the pandemic began. My background and years of experience as a K-12 teacher, my work as an online course instructor, along with a Masters of Educational Technology graduate studies programme, prepared me for the pivot to technology-supported, remote learning. A strong foundation in pedagogy and instructional practice as an educator supports my work and conversations as a learning designer. My experiences developing, designing and delivering my own courses informed my supportive strategies as a learning designer.

**Verena:** I did not take on the title of learning designer until I was hired by a large community to support instructors' design for remote access emergency learning. As a K-12 teacher, I had been approached to consult on a variety of higher education online learning instructional design projects. I had also worked extensively in K-12 online learning to create and develop courses and in higher education designing my own courses. As a result of the pandemic, and after completing my dissertation research on open educational practices, I have primarily worked as an instructional designer of asynchronous online courses for a zero-cost textbook programme integrating OER and open educational practices in higher education courses. However, I call myself an “open learning designer” because my passion is to help

support all educators with learning design while also considering open educational practices.

## **Learning designers in third space**

As learning designers (amongst other things) in Canadian and UK contexts, we are aware that we live and work in a world of privilege, yet, at the same time, our role can be said to exist on the margins of the academy, at least as constituted in conventional campus-based settings. Layers of marginality and hierarchy are evident within the academy, where knowledge, professional credentials and accreditation tend to dictate the importance accorded to an individual's voice (Whitchurch, 2008, 2018). Learning designers who support others to develop courses, like analogous professionals such as academic developers and learning technologists, occupy a distinctive niche in the ecosystem of higher education roles, sometimes described as a third space (Whitchurch, 2012; White & White, 2016), which is situated “betwixt and between” the conventional and well-demarcated educator/academic and professional/support roles. Like other third space professionals, learning designers balance their role between being someone who knows stuff, someone who has an opinion about stuff, and someone who can do stuff (Whitchurch, 2008). They must understand without necessarily being understood and attempt to lead others through design processes without the cultural authority or subject knowledge of those with whom they collaborate.

Third space is consequently regarded as a challenging space for its occupants, but, importantly also, as a liminal and boundary-spanning space of possibility. For Soja (1996), third space is where all individuals can represent their true selves because everyone comes to the space out of respect for others, where everyone considers the *other* as a person. Learning designers can therefore be a bridge between different domains of knowledge and ways of working, and can encourage design that respects the voices, ideas and perspectives of multiple learners in collaborative and interactive knowledge-building experiences.

## **Learning designers in pandemic times**

Prior to the pandemic, online learning design specialists (sometimes designated as providers of technology rather than design support) usually worked closely with educators who needed or chose to connect with them in order to develop or enhance the design of online or blended courses. Learning design support has tended to be considered essential for online teaching and learning, but for courses taught in blended mode there has tended to be less ‘pressure’ on the design of the online element, as face-to-face sessions afford opportunities for interaction and collaboration. As such, for blended-mode educators, working with a learning designer often provided an optional means of teaching enhancement and professional development, to gain personalised, contextual support in order to carefully consider pedagogical approaches and changes to content and assessment. Such collaborations have worked best with adequate time to consider pedagogical needs, to find the right people and resources to support a project, and to acquire skills as needed. This process can result in well researched, designed and supported learning experiences for students – assuming that sufficient learning design support capacity is available.

The tensions and challenges of balancing multiple hierarchies, roles and personalities (even before the pandemic) are highlighted in the literature (Smith et al., 2021). During the

pandemic, this precarious balancing act came crashing down. As course delivery transitioned online, everyone became a client for learning design, while also increasing demands for additional support for educational technology infrastructure and technology, professional development, assessment, creation of content, and student engagement. Learning design became more visible and, in many cases, learning design support roles were subdivided into specialty areas (such as online assessment).

As open educators who had frequently been engaged in advocating for, and design and support of, open learning and teaching approaches, we found that the demands of responding to the pandemic meant that our ability to support open practices and advocacy became very limited. The principles and dreams that OER have afforded to education, and our conviction that integrated open educational practices enhance and support learners to find their voice and connect with others, were left to the side of our desks in the shift from formal learning to informal learning environments, despite the crisis highlighting the need for greater openness.

## **Openness and learning design**

“Open education” refers to a range of related educational practices and movements which, in different ways, act to open up aspects of education to make it more accessible, participatory and equitable. These movements are produced and fostered by an interleaved collection of communities of educators who engage in these opening practices, and importantly also, with each other, around the value, potentials and risks of openness within given contexts. These educators, like ourselves, probably rarely work only or even primarily on “formally open” education projects. We often do such projects on the side, but also bring our open educator selves with us when we do our day jobs, including learning design.

Previous work on open education has informed our thinking about openness in the context of learning design, highlighting the integration, reuse and production of OER (Conole, 2013; Wiley and Hilton, 2018). Cronin (2017) extended open education beyond the initial OER focus to “open educational practices” by including collaborative practices and participatory technologies. Similarly, Paskevicius (2017) connected open practices to all aspects of instructional practice, including instructional design. Designing for openness involves the negotiation of practices in higher education learning spaces (Cronin, 2017) and emphasises the importance of peer review and critical approaches to knowledge (Paskevicius & Irvine, 2019). It also advocates for opening at the margins (Bali et al., 2020). Enhancing and expanding open, accessible, human-centred online learning and alternative assessment practices are essential pedagogical approaches in promoting equitable learning environments (Alhabash, 2021; Mehta & Aguilara, 2020).

Hegarty (2015) describes open learning as an arc in life learning, a “seamless process that occurs throughout life when participants engage in open and collaborative networks, communities, and openly shared repositories of information in a structured way to create their own culture of learning” (p. 3). Hegarty’s description of open learning is distinguished by eight attributes associated with open pedagogy, which include: participatory technologies, working openly with people, innovation and creativity, sharing ideas and resources, connected community, learner generated, reflective practice, and peer review. These prior studies have highlighted open practice and open pedagogy; in this chapter we are curious

about exploring the potential differences and the uniqueness of open learning design in the broader open education context.

## **Open learning design and open educational practice**

When learning designers connect and collaborate with educators, our prior experiences help to guide us in negotiating shared learning design experiences. However, these shared experiences are not without tension. Skills in balancing and negotiating different hierarchical roles, institutional policy, student needs, requiring a plethora of skills and competencies to complete multiple roles, and the demands of current educational contexts pulled us in many directions even before the complications of the pandemic. In our cases, attempting to bring our knowledge, experiences and values as open educators and researchers into our design process often increases this tension and adds additional stuff to consider in a design process. Not only do we advocate for pedagogical considerations in learning design, we foreground consideration for intentional, reflective and open learning design.

As we design learning activities and events, we are challenged to ethically amplify all voices. Since we are often not the teacher of the specific course or the department head in charge of programme outcomes, learning designers are often pedagogically inclined to become “observers” of inequities, from the margins across our institutions. In doing so as “open learning designers”, we find ourselves confronting the troublesome nature of the roles and perceptions of both learning design and open education in relation to accepted norms of campus-based teaching practices. The descriptor “learning designer” suggests a central, agentic role (Wagner, 2021), and in the case of the educator designing the course that they will go on to teach, this may be accurate; but in our experience, a key challenge of the work of supporting learning design is that we are often operating and negotiating from a marginal position, and perhaps at times we may be perceived as purveyors of knowledge and techniques that are of suspect provenance and relevance. It is from this position that we, the authors, have faced challenges and tensions as we advocate, not only for intentional and reflective design, but for the roles and strategies which open educational practices can play in the provision of accessible, inclusive, equitable, flexible, and authentic learning opportunities for higher education students.

Describing our practice as “open” requires some explanation. We are not suggesting that open learning design is a completely different thing from normal learning design, or that there is an opposite “closed learning design”, or that it requires total openness in every aspect. Openness is evident in teaching and learning experiences that are completely in the open, free and informal, but the influence of openness can also be found in cases of making the boundaries of more conventional, formal learning contexts more permeable. In this sense, aspects of openness can be designed as well as, rather than instead of, the pedagogic strategies that drive and support learning in a particular learning context and community. Openness is relative, contextual and applied in a range of ways, opening up aspects of content, practice or process (Havemann, 2020). Open learning design therefore overlaps a range of key terms arising from the open education movement, which aims to support accessible and equitable learning opportunities, as well as collaboration and sharing. Open learning design arises in the interaction between the mindset of an open educator, a person who understands and employs open educational practices, and the process of designing learning (experiences, tasks or resources).

As a wide-ranging term capturing various approaches to opening education, open educational practice encompasses: (a) open sharing of teaching and learning designs and experiences; (b) collaborative development of open educational content and resources; (c) open and accessible co-creation and delivery of learning activities; and (d) the application of shared peer and collaborative assessment and evaluation practices (Bozkurt et al., 2019; Cronin & MacLaren, 2018; Nascimbeni & Burgos, 2016; Paskevicius, 2017; Wiley & Hilton, 2018). This definition is shaped by a philosophy about teaching that “emphasises giving learners choices about medium or media, place of study, pace of study, support mechanisms, and entry and exit points, which are provided mostly with opportunities enabled by educational technologies” (Bozkurt et al., 2019, p. 80).

Roberts (2019; in press) expanded upon Cronin's (2017) connected ideas about learner open readiness by focusing on high school learning contexts, open learning design and balancing open educational practices to expand potential learning opportunities for all (students, teachers and researchers). Open learning design is not contained or defined by one framework bound by OER. Instead, it is a networked, collaborative and participatory learning design (Couros, 2010; Cronin, 2017). It is contextual and it is personalised to the context to meet student learning needs.

In addition to the sharing of reusable content, activities and pedagogic strategies, it is worth noting that the process of learning design itself can also be open(ed). For example, the ABC Learning Design method developed by Young and Perović (2016) opens up the process of design through workshopping, which gives participants a common language with which to discuss types of learning activities while working through a series of design activities, including storyboarding of the learning journey through a course. Resources to support ABC workshops are openly licensed and shared online<sup>1</sup> for anyone to use and adapt, and a growing international community of practice has fostered widespread adoption and localisation of the method (see for example the chapter by Gormley, Stone and Lowney, in this volume). Building upon this approach, the IDEAs resource developed by Walker et al. (2021) provides a collection of designs or “recipes” for digitally-supported learning activities which can be modified for different subject areas, levels and contexts to support students’ engagement and development of key learning skills (Colaiacomo & Havemann, 2022).

## **Intentional, reflective and open learning design**

Open learning design can be understood as a subset of practices which are undertaken by open educators. Nascimbeni and Burgos (2016) provide an holistic description of an open educator as one who

chooses to use open approaches, when possible and appropriate, with the aim to remove all unnecessary barriers to learning. He/she works through an open online identity and relies on online social networking to enrich and implement his/her work, understanding that collaboration bears a responsibility towards the work of others. (p. 4)

Open learning design can provide flexible alternatives that promote iterative and responsive learning in multiple media. The learners can collaboratively and individually share their learning experiences through open and closed feedback loops that include multiple nodes of

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<sup>1</sup> <https://abc-ld.org>

learning (people, spaces, perspectives, experiences), across formal, non-formal and informal learning environments. Open learning principles help instructors balance the focus on the completion of learning products that provide evidence of learning but also develop awareness of the learning process. These principles can promote student awareness of their agency within the learning process by providing students with choice in how to participate and contribute to a learning community through integrating options for multiple mediums in which students can share and communicate their learning transparently, and by ensuring that students receive and give timely feedback in order to learn.

We have an additional layer to our identities as open educators and open educational researchers; we therefore apply this lens to our learning design work. Because we take a broad view of openness as a spectrum of open educational practices, this impacts the way we work. We navigate into, through and across boundaries as we design in collaboration with others. As learning designers, we come into each project aware that our pedagogical choices have a ripple effect. Moreover, we consider both the positives of the technological and pedagogical tools selected for use in a course design, but also their potentially “troublesome nature” (Smidt et al., 2018). As such, we have to recognise our intentions in terms of which digital tools we are using, which activities we choose to integrate and which content we choose to consider. While there may be positive pedagogical consequences of using specific digital tools, practices and content with individual students, there are also possible consequences to student safety, data collection and privacy. There is also always an understanding of designing for open readiness (Cronin, 2017) to ensure that each student has the opportunity to be as open as they feel comfortable being and the course has the flexibility to afford multiple open entry points. The underlying open learning design principles highlight and distinguish our learning design options from other online course designs.

As learning designers, our role is to promote and create third space bridges to connect the open pedagogy attributes highlighted by Hegarty (2015), while ensuring that we are meeting institutional course design policies and protocols. For example, there are no technological templates or guides to follow when integrating the design of learning to flow between learning management systems and twitter chats. It is the open learning designer’s role to develop awareness around the potential for open educational practices while balancing the need for student-centred design that ensures student choice, safety and privacy, and considers digital fluency and institutional demands. Advocating and building awareness of issues of equity, diversity, accessibility and inclusion undergirds these student-centred and instructor-led course designs.

The principles of open learning design, as outlined by Roberts (2019) and expanded upon within the context of this paper suggest that open learning designers need to consider that :

- Learning occurs by encouraging the co-design of personally relevant learning pathways.
- Learners should collaboratively and individually share their learning experiences through open and closed feedback loops.
- Learning occurs in multiple spaces, connects multiple nodes of learning, includes multiple perspectives and promotes multiple experiences and processes.
- Learners transparently demonstrate their learning in meaningful ways.
- Learning occurs through stages and continuums and needs to be supported in a variety of ways.

- Learning is a personal learning experience that transcends formal learning environments.
- Open learning emphasises the learning process in order to build upon and share community knowledge.

We suggest that open learning design can encourage creativity, innovation and student-centred learning, thus opening educational practices in some of the following ways:

- Use of open engagement/participatory learning (e.g. blogs, Twitter chat) in course designs.
- Integrate learning within and outside learning management systems.
- Consider alternative assessments through integrating blogging, social media and reflexive practices.
- Explicitly address and reflect on the readiness of learners and instructors to engage in learning design that is open and shared.

## **Contextual application**

As intentional, reflective open learning designers, we were challenged in the context of the pandemic to model values that prioritise students' learning, but in addition (or rather, first of all), honour them as human beings who face and experience the stress and trauma of the situation in a plethora of ways. Prior to the pandemic, in traditional teaching contexts or co-creation experiences, we were able to more readily design for intentional open learning design. However, at the onset and during the pandemic, it became more difficult to challenge existing learning design mindsets. The focus shifted to one of "getting learning online" and making things happen, rather than reimagining pedagogical approaches.

Within the tensions and online learning design that we experienced as a result of the pandemic, we co-designed courses that may not necessarily look or feel open, nor explicitly integrate OER. We attempted to influence course designs that reveal a human-centred look and feel. These designs provide students with space for questions, a flexible and carefully considered workload, a variety of synchronous and asynchronous activities, an awareness of reasonable bandwidth requirements, evidence of assignment considerations, and explicit recognition of privacy issues that emerged, particularly with the growing use of video gatherings to replace in-person classroom sessions. These were balanced within the tensions of specific course and programme requirements, along with consideration to those instructors working toward tenure or subject to university review. Some examples of intentional, reflective and open learning design considerations are described in the following section.

## **Conceptual design: Course topics alignment**

To ensure that students have the opportunity to develop open readiness and the confidence to share their learning, we focus on open learning principles that are considered a major component of the course learning design process. For example, during the blueprint and planning stages, through conversation with the course author and/or instructor, the course outcomes are split into conceptual topics that are connected to the course learning outcomes, and constructively aligned with the course activities, assessments and course

content. Topics can then be divided into sub-topics to scaffold learning throughout the course. We focus the coursework on opportunities for students to share their learning with different audiences. Intentional and reflective open learning design therefore considers the timing, within the ebb and flow of the course, toward the who, what, where, when, and how to give and receive feedback.

## **Reflective learning opportunities: Blogging**

Discussion posts in learning management systems are designed to encourage students to interact with each other and share their ideas within a participatory medium. As open learning designers, we encourage the use of discussion threads, but also encourage instructors to consider the use of open blogging to bridge student writing between the formal learning environment within the learning management system and the informal learning environments found outside the learning management system. Blogs provide an opportunity for students to develop digital skills, fluencies and competencies that can be applied beyond course learning outcomes. Blogging also provides opportunities to discuss safety and privacy within digital writing spaces, thus providing a way for students to intentionally consider ownership and authorship of assignments and a space for reflection after a course has been formally completed. Pedagogical practices such as blogging range across a spectrum of openness and it is essential to consider the benefits, challenges and risks of open approaches (Tur et al., 2020).

## **Integration of social media: Twitter chats**

Another intentional open learning design activity is the integration of a course hashtag to be used in social media communications in spaces such as Twitter. While Twitter is a social media tool that requires a password in order to share content, anyone with access to the internet can observe a Twitter stream and search for a specific hashtag. As such, students can choose to join Twitter, either anonymously or using their real name, or observe tweets without signing up for an account. The initial twitter hashtag activity can be as simple as an asynchronous or synchronous analysis of tweets collected using a hashtag or expanded into a course twitter chat (Brown & Roberts, 2022). Course hashtag curation creates an opportunity to add content and perspective to your course, outside of the learning management system. Course hashtags also provide an opportunity for others outside of the course to participate and share their perspectives with the class in a Twitter thread. Holding a Twitter chat focusing on course topics or readings – conducted either during a scheduled time period during a class or course event, or an extended period to enable deeper discourse on a challenging concept – can expand possibilities for open engagement between and among students, as well as open up the opportunity to engage with a broader audience.

## **Personalised and adaptable content: OER**

OER are “learning, teaching and research materials in any format and medium that reside in the public domain or are under copyright that have been released under an open licence,

that permit no cost access, reuse, repurpose, adaptation and redistribution by others”.<sup>2</sup> Using content that is openly accessible to all provides instructors the opportunity to personalise course materials by adapting or modifying content to meet individual learning needs or contextual factors. This foregrounds the growing need to ensure accessibility so that all students can see, hear and/or feel course materials in a variety of contexts or formats. While curated collections of openly accessible OER are available to learning designers and course instructors, it is often challenging to find elements that immediately fit the course content or context without adaptation. A positive outcome from this has been an increasing interest in repositioning the student from consumer to producer, making the development of resources core to the learning process. The rapid deployment of online course designs during the pandemic pivot may have frequently precluded the careful consideration of use or creation of OER, but in our emergence from the pandemic, we must reflect on the spiralling costs of commercial resources and the pedagogic opportunities inherent in resource creation, and therefore consider the valuable role for OER within intentional open learning design.

## **Promoting reflective practices for learning designers and students**

As an example of a reflective praxis as a learning designer, we share this excerpt from one of the author’s personal reflections as an open learning designer during the pandemic, which reveals an intentional, reflective and open learning design experience:

We are working on writing about our experiences and reflections that acted as my safe learning space over the last year. In the middle of the chaos and unprecedented events, we would meet and discuss what was happening in our worlds and contexts. These iterative reflective check-ins were an essential element in my being able to support others professionally throughout the pandemic, to ensure that I was not losing my professional identity as an open learning advocate and researcher as I was surrounded by competing narratives and lack of confidence in my own skills and abilities and as a source of support for putting learning first in a time of crisis. I am in debt to [the fellow open learning designer] as a friend and colleague and I know our constant brainstorming and ideation will lead to continuous knowledge building and pushing the barriers of open learning continuums. (V. Roberts, pers. comm., 6 August 2020)

Not only for their own reflective practices, open learning designers consider how to design for reflective and metacognitive activities within course designs where students and instructors engage in reflective practice. When course activities are designed to be participatory and transparent, considerations should include how to model ways to share, give and receive feedback. Grouping structures and strategies are often applied within online course designs, but we suggest the introduction and application of social pod groups early in the course. Social pods are semi-structured, small groups of learners who self-select to connect, interact and give feedback to each other throughout a course (DeWaard & Roberts, 2021). These social pods provide an opportunity for the students to support each other through informal conversations to clarify instructor and course expectations while developing

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<sup>2</sup> [http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-url\\_id=49556&url\\_do=do\\_topic&url\\_section=201.html](http://portal.unesco.org/en/ev.php-url_id=49556&url_do=do_topic&url_section=201.html)

trusting relationships with peers during the course.

In addition to participatory, collaborative and interactive activities, instructors are encouraged to integrate reflective activities. These activities are opportunities when students are encouraged to share their thoughts, ideas and insights, and can be done through personal blog posts or through synchronous conversations (DeWaard & Roberts, 2021). The focus is on developing and strengthening students' open thinking with others, not only within the course, but engaging the voices of external experts, as shared in the work of Zamora and Levine (2017). One example from personal experience is the design of a course that provided an opportunity for students to connect with authors of selected course readings as a means of connecting topics and course readings to student learning in more authentic ways.

As open learning designers, we strive to provide flexible alternatives that promote iterative and responsive learning in multiple mediums. Learners can then collaboratively and individually share their learning experiences through open and closed feedback loops that include multiple people, spaces, perspectives, experiences and nodes of learning in formal and informal, or even professional learning environments.

Through conversations with course instructors during the design phase and applying the guiding principles of open learning design, we help instructors balance the focus on the completion of learning products that provide evidence of learning, while also developing awareness of the learning process. These principles can promote student awareness of their agency within the learning process by providing student choice in how to participate and contribute to a learning community, by integrating options for multiple mediums through which students can share and communicate their learning transparently, and by ensuring that students receive and give timely feedback in order to learn.

## **Conclusion**

As intentional, reflective and open learning designers, we suggest that critical use of the internet and networked learning can provide productive spaces to address the needs of marginalised, racialised or indigenous students. We, as learning designers, can make an impact through the inclusion of equity and diversity into learning spaces that honour a culture focused on consciousness whereby students experience learning through multiple human interactions (Whitchurch, 2012). Not only should instructors and learning designers spend time together as they consider how to design courses that meet traditional, contextual and emerging instructional design frameworks; they can also collaborate and connect with each other in meaningful ways to build knowledge through explicitly and openly sharing experiences and ideas. This shift towards interdependence in learning design provides an exciting emerging open participatory co-design. The boundaries between academic and practitioner, and between formal and informal learning, can be bridged as learning designers and instructors create courses that challenge learners to increase social interaction in multiple online spaces, communities and networks.

Learning designers, as professionals working toward open learning design, can build relationships with other higher education professionals and instructors to co-design digital artefacts in order to build shared knowledge, not only with each other, but with the students

they teach. We design the potential to support decentralised, digitally safe, respectful collaborative learning design spaces.

A win is that learning design is better understood as a result of rich conversations, with a strong focus on the human elements necessary during pandemic course design work. For example, a growing awareness of the need for culturally relevant pedagogies (Ladson-Billings, 2021; Levitan & Johnson, 2020), the impact of trauma in teaching and learning environments (Bozkurt, 2021), and the growing need for student mental health and physical well-being (Zhou & Zhang, 2021) can support our work to infuse these considerations into course designs when working with instructors. It may reveal course designs with a more caring, responsive, reflective and human-oriented learning environment for students.

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