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Dreaming forward: Learning designers exploring the gap between current realities and imagined futures

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In this paper, we reflect as third space professionals, two academic staff and two professional staff, working in higher education across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Using collaborative autoethnography, we draw on Marty Neumeier's concept of "applied imagination" to explore how we envision the future of our work. Our dreaming is grounded in lived experience and shaped by the complex psychosocial landscape of navigating contemporary institutions. Through collective reflection, we interrogate not only our own identities but also the wider possibilities and tensions inherent in third space roles. Thematic analysis of our narratives revealed three central themes: agency, autonomy, and authority. We share a desire to be recognised as initiators and leaders who are trusted to shape the future of teaching and learning, not merely to implement the visions of others. For us, autonomy means intellectual and creative freedom; authority is about earned legitimacy and influence rather than formal power. While we acknowledge the tensions and dissonance that arise within this psychosocial landscape, we also find it a generative space for curiosity, collective sense-making, and new possibilities for third space professionals in universities.

Keywords: Learning Design; Third Space; Higher Education; Self-actualising, Applied Imagination, Psychosocial, Collaborative Autoethnography

Position statement

This paper is grounded in our lived experiences as four professionals working in higher education across Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Our collective backgrounds span both academic and professional staff roles (Senior Curriculum Developer, Academic Developer, Educational Consultant, Learning Designer, Instructional Designer, and Senior Lecturer in Academic Development), reflecting the hybrid nature of what is often termed the "Third Space" (Whitchurch, 2008; Whitchurch & Healy, 2024). While the concept of Third Space offers a useful lens for understanding our positions at the intersection of academic and professional domains, we also recognise its limitations as a label. For some of us, it is important to note that the term feels restrictive, unable to fully capture the complexity and diversity of our professional identities, and we acknowledge the diversity of perspectives through which we engage in our work, act in our environments, and interpret our experiences.

Despite our varied job titles, we are united by a shared commitment to learning design as the foundation of our practices. We define learning design as the intentional structuring of educational experiences to support meaningful learning, drawing on creative problem-solving, pedagogical expertise, and human-centred approach, in line with the Larnaca Declaration on Learning Design (Dalziel et al., 2016). Our reflections are

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inherently subjective and situated, shaped by our personal and professional journeys. We do not claim to represent all learning designers or Third Space professionals, nor the views of any institution. Nonetheless, we believe our themes will resonate with colleagues in related roles, who similarly navigate ambiguity and institutional complexity while striving to maintain purpose and integrity in their work.

Introduction

At the heart of this paper lies a collaborative act of radical imagining: four third-space professionals engaged in learning design work, “dream” together about what their roles could be. These visions are not abstract fantasies; rather, they are grounded reflections shaped by lived experience, professional identity, and the institutional realities of higher education (Dave, 2024). Drawing on Marty Neumeier’s (2012) concept of dreaming as “applied imagination”, we envision possibilities that are both aspirational and practical. In doing so, this paper presents an imaginative and empowering approach to articulating ways of being and doing. This reflective process is inherently self-actualising, serving as both a work for and by learning design professionals. Learning design and the broader category of ‘Third Space’ professional roles continue to be of interest as a research subject (Preece et al, 2025). As the profession grows and matures, particularly in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, there is increasing interest in understanding the identities of those who inhabit it (Mitchell et al. 2025), the skills required to succeed and the pathways for training future learning designers (MacLean & Scott, 2011; Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022) and the nuances of its many forms and role titles (Whitchurch & Healy, 2024).

Much of this scholarship is grounded in the experiences of current practitioners, which offers valuable insights into the realities of the role. However, these experiences do not occur in isolation. They are shaped by institutional structures, academic cultures, funding pressures, strategic pivots, and broader societal forces. For example, during the COVID-19 pandemic, many learning designers found themselves in high demand, but often for technical support (e.g., Zoom troubleshooting; LMS support) rather than pedagogical problem-solving (Tifflin, 2020; Xie et al., 2021). If we define our roles solely by what we have done or are currently doing, we risk reinforcing a limited view of our professional identity and narrowed parameters of practice. We add bricks to walls that would hold us in. Therefore, we dare ask instead: What could our roles become?

Our early dialogues threw a spotlight on our beliefs about ourselves and our work. When we talked, we used words that spoke to empowerment and dissonance in our everyday work. Learning designers in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, as third space professionals, routinely encounter both in their everyday working lives within higher education. The evolving role of learning designers in higher education has been increasingly conceptualised through the lens of the “third space” (Whitchurch, 2008; Pretero, et.al, 2023). This space is characterised by the intersection of academic and professional domains, where hybrid roles emerge to support the complex demands of contemporary universities. A growing body of literature highlights the empowering aspects of learning design work. Learning designers are often positioned as key agents of educational innovation, able to draw on pedagogical expertise, technological fluency, and creative problem-solving to co-create meaningful learning experiences (Bennett et al., 2018). Learning designers work with others; their roles are inherently collaborative (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022). We think it is worth noting that learning designers experience variation in how their work is recognised as a profession, with their career pathways, in their job titles, and in professional learning opportunities. We consider this variability as reflecting instabilities that can influence perceptions and experiences of agency and power. Educational research literature has noted the ambiguity of third space roles which can result in unclear boundaries and expectations, limited professional recognition, and constrained opportunities for advancement (Conway, 2013; Mitchell et al., 2017; Bennett et al., 2018). There seems a sustained perception in some ways that learning design work is ancillary to academic work. We consider this as contributing to experiences of marginalisation and invisibility within institutional hierarchies (Bennett et al., 2018). Further, our reflective discussion pointed to cognitive and affective strain, and a sense of professional precarity, felt by learning designers as we navigate complex organisational structures and advocate for our value (Heggart & Dickson-Deane, 2022; Jonassen, 2008). We see these features of third-space work as worthy of exploration.

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Our inquiry is more than a speculative exercise. We argue that forward-looking reflection is essential in a field marked by complexity and ambiguity. Uncomfortable moments of conflicting beliefs, aligning with Festinger's (1957) views on cognitive dissonance, made for robust shared conversation, during which we uncovered common tensions, institutional expectations, and our own beliefs about what learning design can and ought to be. We recognised tensions which centred on agency, autonomy, and authority carry significant implications for self-actualising work, and we argue that learning designers' psychosocial experiences, particularly for roles that may easily be overlooked or not well understood in institutional structures and initiatives. While the well-being of academic staff has been studied (Fetherston et al., 2020; Urbina-Garcia, 2020), learning designers' own psychosocial experiences usually go unacknowledged. This paper takes a moment to engage in applied imagining of what learning design and other Third Space roles could become, serving both as a self-actualising initiative for professionals and to surface the often-unacknowledged psychosocial dimensions involved in the work. This exploration contributes to what we see as a gap in educational research discussion around the psychosocial complexities of learning designers' experiences in higher education.

Methodology

The methodology for this paper emerged through our collective interest in third space professionals as part of a scholarly community of practice engaged in educational research and publishing. As participants in ASCILITE's Community Mentoring Programme (CMP), our fortnightly meetings about learning design work and research provided the setting for substantive collegial conversations. These discussions revealed our personal imaginings of what our work could or should be, prompting us to reflect on our diverse perspectives as the basis for a meaningful study. Recognising our active engagement in third space work and the richness of our lived experience, we identified collaborative autoethnography as an appropriate methodological approach to make our voices heard (Ellis et al., 2011; Chang et al., 2012). Collaborative autoethnography is particularly apt for studies where researchers are also participants, as it foregrounds personal narrative, reflexivity, and the co-construction of meaning (Denshire, 2014). We felt that our approach was especially relevant to current and aspiring learning designers and third space professionals who grapple with similar concerns (Dave, 2024).

Our data generation process involved frequent, open-ended discussions where we challenged each other's assumptions, shared personal experiences, sometimes disagreed or contested interpretations, and collective sense-making. After each meeting, we individually reflected on the discussions, often revisiting and reworking our perspectives before regrouping to further interrogate emerging concepts and experiences. These reflective responses formed the primary data set for this study. Our individual narratives served as a richly detailed case, capturing the nuanced realities of identity and practice. Our accounts were interpretive, highlighting the interplay between personal experience and broader dynamics. The inclusion of Australian and Aotearoa New Zealand perspectives added further depth, as we explored their experiences framed within and outside of our contexts. We engaged in a synthesis to generate cross-case insights. This involved collaboratively examining each narrative, identifying points of resonance and divergence, consolidating thoughts using key literature as a guide and tracing how particular themes or challenges manifested across our varied experiences. While we do not formally use case study methodology, our approach draws on its analytical synergies by attending to both the depth of individual experience and the patterns that emerge in dialogue. Through this iterative process, we identified recurring motifs. Consideration of cross-case synthesis enabled us to move beyond isolated accounts, generating insights that illuminate both commonalities and the diversity of pathways within our mentoring group. This process enabled us to gain insights that would not have surfaced from single cases alone.

To guide our analytic process, we adopted thematic analysis, widely used for identifying, analysing, and reporting patterns within qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). The steps included collating reflections generated throughout the process; reading and coding the reflections to identify recurring ideas and patterns; collaboratively discussing and refining themes, acknowledging points of agreement and contestation; and interpreting the themes considering our shared and divergent experiences as third space workers and scholars. This approach allowed us to honour both the individual voice and the collective dialogue that shaped our understanding, while also providing a systematic framework for analysis.

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Rigour and trustworthiness were maintained through ongoing, collaborative engagement across all stages of the research process. Regular group meetings provided a structured forum for collective reflection, enabling us to dynamically generate and interrogate our data in discursive cycles, interpretations, and emerging meanings in a transparent and iterative manner. This approach ensured that methodological decisions were made collaboratively, with each participant contributing their perspectives and critical insights. As all participants are also authors of this paper, the boundaries between the researcher and the researched were intentionally blurred, generating practices of mutual accountability and shared ownership over the research narrative. Reflexivity was central to our practice; we consistently revisited our assumptions, challenged one another's interpretations, and sought to surface both consensus and divergence within our group. This dialogic process enhanced the credibility of our findings by ensuring that multiple viewpoints were considered and that our interpretations were grounded in collective sense-making. To further strengthen trustworthiness, we documented our analytic decisions and thematic development, maintaining a record of our discussions and reflections. By foregrounding transparency, reflexivity, and collaborative dialogue, we have sought to uphold the highest standards of qualitative research rigour within the context of collaborative autoethnography.

Discussion

Before we can reimagine the future of learning design, we must first surface the core aspirations that shape our professional identities. Through our collaborative reflections, three themes stood out as both deeply personal and fundamentally interconnected: agency, autonomy, and authority. These are not abstract concepts or distant ideals. Instead, they are living, evolving experiences that are contextually situated daily realities. For us, dreaming of agency, autonomy, and authority is about more than seeking control or recognition; it is about reclaiming the power to initiate, to create, and to influence meaningful change in our work and our institutions. In the following sections, we explore what it means to imagine and strive for these qualities in our roles as learning designers. We begin with agency, and consider how it feels, what it makes possible, and why it matters, then examine autonomy and authority as distinct, through interconnected concepts.

Dreaming of/about agency

When we reflected together on the idea of agency in our roles as learning designers, we did not consider it a fixed quality, but as something actively shaped by our contexts and ourselves. Agency, for us, was not about having control necessarily but more about reclaiming the space to initiate, to lead, and to co-create meaningful change in the places we travelled. We found ourselves dreaming of being present from the very beginnings of things, able to help set direction rather than after key decisions were already made. We imagined being trusted to propose new strategies and to pursue them without having to navigate endless layers of approval. In those moments, agency felt like a shared responsibility to create environments where creative and collaborative problem-solving could flourish, not just for us, but for everyone we worked with. For some of us, it felt like an impossible dream.

As illustrated in Table 1, our reflections revealed a strong desire for decision-making, initiative, and co-ownership in our work. We were drawn to the idea of working on “wicked problems”, understood as the complex, novel challenges that invited risk-taking and innovation rather than repetition of the same daily tasks (Rittel & Webber, 1973). This dream of agency was about moving beyond reactive or service-oriented roles and instead stepping into spaces where we could actively shape who we were and who we wanted to become as professionals (Abblitt, 2024). For us, dreaming of agency was not only about personal empowerment, but about being recognised as legitimate contributors and initiators who are trusted to lead, to question, and to help shape the future of teaching and learning. In this way, agency was something we imagined, strived for, and, at our best, enacted together.

Table 1

Thematic Analysis of Agency in Learning Designers' Ideal Work: Participant Reflections

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Descriptive code: Agency

Theme emerging: Learning designers include conceptualisations of agency when imagining their ideal work

Participant Reflections for analysis

Identifying patterns of experiences

"I want to be present from the outset, helping set the direction of educational initiatives" (Rae)

Desire for decision-making and initiative in direction setting and experimentation

"I can propose new ideas and pursue them, without having to navigate several layers of approval... I am trusted to explore, experiment, and share what I learn" (Simin)

"Agency is not a solitary pursuit but a responsibility to create a space where creative and collaborative problem-solving can flourish for everyone" (Kashmira)

Regard co-ownership and empowered engagement in shared problem-solving as part of working spaces

I would love to create a space where solving wicked problems is what I would do... not working on similar or the same types of problems day in and out" (Camille)

Rae, for example, reflects on her aspiration to be involved from the outset of educational initiatives, not merely consulted after decisions have been made. Her vision of agency is deeply informed by her sociocultural background and her commitment to empowerment. Simin similarly envisions a role where she can propose and lead projects aligned with both her interests and institutional goals. Her dream is grounded in a culture of trust, where agency is supported rather than managed. Kashmira frames agency as a contagious force. For her, it is a responsibility to create environments where others are empowered to innovate. Her vision of agency is not individualistic, but collective and facilitative. Camille's reflection echoes this theme of agency as investigative freedom. She dreams of a role where she can take risks, challenge assumptions, and pursue "wicked problems" in learning design.

Our reflections reveal a shared yearning for agency that is not only about personal empowerment but also about professional legitimacy and systemic impact. Dreaming of agency means imagining roles where learning designers are not just implementers, but initiators (Tsai & Dickson-Deane, 2022), where they are trusted to lead, to question, and to shape the future of teaching and learning.

Dreaming of/about autonomy

In our reflections, autonomy emerged as something far deeper and more complex than simply having independence or flexibility in our day-to-day work. For us, autonomy was about the freedom to think, to create, and to shape the direction of our roles as learning designers. Dreaming of autonomy meant reclaiming space. We take this as not just physical or temporal, but an intellectual and creative space where we engage in work that feels meaningful and aligned with our values. Our individual accounts highlighted the many layers of autonomy we longed for in our professional lives, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2

Thematic Analysis of Autonomy in Learning Designers' Ideal Work: Participant Reflections

Descriptive code: Autonomy

Theme emerging: Learning designers imagine an ideal where autonomy can be actively cultivated and reclaimed, providing the foundation for ongoing inquiry and innovation in their work

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Participant Reflections for analysis

“Autonomy begins as an internal capacity, but when my expertise and role are genuinely recognised and valued, I’m more fully empowered in my work. It’s about more than managing myself and my tasks; it’s also about being recognised as holding authoritative capability to act in ways that matter” (Rae)

“I want to reclaim creativity by making space for experimentation and trusting the value of ideas before they’re fully formed” (Simin)

“This professional liberty transforms the work from merely delivering programs to a continuous, dynamic process of inquiry” (Kashmira)

“True innovations in learning and teaching are not formed under pressure. They require the space to try, change, believe and then disbelieve” (Camille)

Identifying patterns of experiences

Idea that freedom to shape and reclaim one’s professional space can be actively developed and renewed

Consider that working from a foundation that supports independent decision-making, and self-direction enables ongoing adaptation, refinement of practice, and professional growth

For Rae, autonomy was inseparable from recognition. She dreamed of a role where her expertise was not only respected but actively included in strategic decision-making. For her, autonomy was about being trusted to help shape priorities and strategies, not just being left to manage her own tasks. Simin’s vision of autonomy centred on reclaiming creativity by making space for experimentation and trusting the value of ideas before they were fully formed. She imagined a professional life where she could initiate projects and explore possibilities, supported by an environment of trust and encouragement. Kashmira described autonomy as a kind of professional liberty imbued with a freedom to move beyond simply delivering programmes to engaging in a continuous, dynamic process of inquiry. She valued the ability to chart her own course within broad boundaries, taking calculated risks and innovating as part of her everyday work. Camille echoed this desire for intellectual freedom. She dreamed of an environment where newness was welcomed, where she could try, fail, and try again in pursuit of better outcomes for learners. For her, autonomy was foundational to creativity and ongoing growth.

Across our reflections, autonomy was not about working in isolation but about having the creative freedom and trust to think deeply, act boldly, and contribute meaningfully to our communities. Dreaming of autonomy meant imagining roles where we were not constrained by rigid processes or reactive demands but empowered to shape our work and influence the future of education together. The patterns in our stories, brought together reveal autonomy as both a foundation and an aspiration for our ongoing inquiry and innovation.

Dreaming of/about authority

In our reflections, authority surfaced as a nuanced and often ambiguous concept, especially given our mix of academic and professional roles. Unlike academic staff, those of us in professional learning design positions rarely held formal power over curriculum or pedagogy, yet we were still expected to influence both. For those of us in academic appointments, authority was more readily conferred through institutional structures, but even then, it was often circumscribed by broader hierarchies and organisational structures. Our individual accounts, brought together in Table 3, highlighted how the imagining of authority differed across our roles.

Table 3

Thematic Analysis of Authority in Learning Designers’ Ideal Work: Participant Reflections

Descriptive code: Authority

Theme emerging: Learning designers imagine roles where their authority is rooted in expertise and respect that enables them to influence both everyday practices and broader institutional directions

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Participant Reflections for analysis

"While I am trusted to be creative within curriculum design projects, broader authority to influence institutional direction can still feel out of reach" (Rae)

"Most of all, I want to claim my professional voice: to speak honestly about what's working and what's not, and to help shape a culture where learning designers are seen as creative, strategic partners in education" (Simin)

"It is the direct result of creating tangible impact, of demonstrating expertise, and of leading through influence and peer recognition" (Kashmira)

"Having autonomy, agency and power are the foundations of what a creative environment for this purpose would look like... forging a new way of knowing" (Camille)

Identifying patterns of experiences

Belief that meaningful impact is related to expertise and peer respect, along with the power to influence decisions and drive innovation within the system

Aspire to a role and voice that enable meaningful influence over institutional directions and ways of working

Rae and Simin, as professional staff, experienced authority as something to be continually negotiated and earned and rooted in the recognition of expertise and the ability to demonstrate impact. Rae's reflection captured the tension between being trusted to be creative within specific projects and feeling that broader authority to influence institutional direction remained out of reach. Her aspiration was to be recognised as a co-creator of educational direction, not just a contributor after the fact. Simin envisioned authority as the ability to claim her professional voice and to speak honestly about what was working and what was not, and to help shape a culture where learning designers were seen as creative, strategic partners in education. For both, authority was grounded in visibility, voice, and shared ownership of outcomes, rather than formal position. In contrast, Kashmira and Camille, as academic staff, found that authority was more closely linked to their formal roles, but still required ongoing cultivation. Kashmira saw authority as the authentic result of autonomy and agency put into action, earned through tangible impact, peer recognition, and the ability to lead through influence rather than through positional power alone. Camille's reflection reinforced this perspective. She dreamed of an environment where authority was not simply conferred, but cultivated through innovation, risk-taking, and the creation of new knowledge. For Camille, authority was tied to the power to shape learning environments and to challenge established norms, but she also recognised the limits imposed by institutional structures.

Threaded through our reflections, we imagined authority as relational and important. It is experienced differently depending on our professional or academic positioning. It was not about control, but about being trusted to lead, to innovate, and to contribute meaningfully to institutional knowledge (Allman, et. al, 2024). Dreaming of authority meant envisioning a future where learning designers, regardless of their formal status, were recognised not only for what they did, but for what they knew, and for how they shaped the educational landscape through thoughtful, courageous, and collaborative practice.

Cross-case insights: Emergent synthesis from collaborative autoethnography

Through our collaborative autoethnographic process, we each shared personal narratives of what agency, autonomy, and authority could look like in our ideal work. While our stories were shaped by distinct personal histories and institutional contexts, the process of reflecting together enabled a cross-case synthesis that surfaced both shared aspirations and important points of divergence. It became clear that our individual experiences, while unique, shared resonant themes around agency, autonomy, and authority in learning design. To synthesise these insights, we turned to the vignette as a concise, narrative form that animates abstract concepts and grounds them in lived reality. Vignettes are particularly powerful in qualitative research because they allow readers to step into the everyday realities of others, illustrating key points and provoking reflection (Pitard, 2016). Through these personal stories, we sought to bring our collective findings to life and

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highlight how these meta-concepts are felt, negotiated, and imagined in our professional contexts. The four vignettes that follow do not simply illustrate individual perspectives; together, they form a cross-case tapestry. They reveal both the common ground and the nuanced differences that emerged as we explored what it means to dream of agency, autonomy, and authority as learning designers. In doing so, they offer a framework for understanding how these concepts are enacted, challenged, and transformed in practice. Below, we outline the key cross-case insights that emerged from our four interwoven vignettes.

Vignettes

Rae: Realising recognition – a support for agency

“My work as a learning designer isn’t just about independent control over tasks. It’s about being genuinely recognised as having a meaningful say in shaping outcomes in your community. Growing up in apartheid-era South Africa, I know the cost of being denied that recognition. For me, agency is strategic and means having a real capacity to act. It’s being at the table where decisions are made. Being seen and heard is a strategic key to empowered, influential practice”.

Rae’s story highlights recognising voices as a support for agency. Simin’s reflection takes this further, exploring how agency and autonomy can be reclaimed and enacted in daily professional life.

Simin: Reclaiming autonomy - from recognition to creative action

“Building on the need for recognition, I see autonomy as the freedom to shape my own projects and contribute ideas that matter. My ideal role is not just about being trusted to manage my time, but about being empowered to lead, experiment, and share what I learn. Agency here is active: it’s about professional trust, collaborative feedback, and being valued as a thought partner. I want to reclaim my professional voice, moving beyond service provision to a creative, strategic partnership. This is where autonomy transforms from an ideal into a lived practice”.

Simin’s pursuit of creative autonomy leads to Kashmira’s vision, which emphasises using this autonomy and agency to empower others and build sustainable, collaborative environments.

Kashmira: Empowering others - agency as a collective force

“With recognition and creative autonomy as a base, I see my ideal role as intentionally designed for impact, not just for myself, but for the broader community. Autonomy is an active mandate to investigate, take risks, and solve “wicked problems.” Agency becomes a contagious force, fostering collective ownership and excitement. Here, authority is earned, not given, through demonstrated impact and peer recognition. My goal is to create a culture of inquiry and empowerment, where agency is shared and sustained across the institution”.

Kashmira’s vision of collective agency and earned authority sets the stage for Camille, who embraces the complexity and creative risk that come with true power.

Camille: Embracing complexity – authority through creative risk

“Taking up the thread of empowerment, I imagine a role where complexity and unpredictability are embraced. True autonomy and agency mean normalising risk, forging new connections, and constantly testing what works in learning design. Authority is not about control, but about creating environments where innovation thrives, where it’s safe to try, fail, and try again. Here, agency, autonomy, and authority are foundational to fostering creativity and accelerating access to new ways of knowing. This is the ultimate expression of professional power: the freedom to create, to challenge, and to lead transformational change”.

Camille’s imagining extends the others by showing how agency, autonomy, and collective empowerment enable true authority where risk-taking, innovation, and transformational change become possible.

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Taken together the four vignettes do more than illustrate individual perspectives; together, they weave a cross-case tapestry that reveals both shared themes and nuanced differences in how learning designers imagine and experience agency, autonomy, and authority. These narratives illuminate the complex ways these meta-concepts are enacted, challenged, and transformed in practice.

Thoughts on the psychosocial landscape of learning designers

The preceding analyses of agency, autonomy, and authority demonstrate how these meta-concepts are central to learning designers' sense of professional identity and purpose. However, our reflections and cross-case insights also reveal a persistent tension: when everyday realities undermine these ideals, we consider that profound psychosocial impact emerges in the form of cognitive dissonance. Festinger's (1957) description views cognitive dissonance not as an abstract discomfort but as a lived, psychosocial strain that arises, as implied in Vykopalová (2025), when values, expertise, and aspirations conflict with constraints and expectations. Our view is that such misalignment is not benign. Across our narratives, it manifests as chronic stress, diminishing morale, and a sense of disappointment, a pattern we encountered repeatedly. These psychosocial impacts are not merely individual challenges and represent systemic risks to both staff well-being and organisational effectiveness. Unaddressed, they can lead to high staff turnover, loss of institutional knowledge, and reputational harm (Urbina-Garcia, 2020).

The psychosocial impacts experienced by learning designers are not simply individual challenges, but signals of a deeper cultural misalignment. Addressing these risks requires more than personal resilience or isolated policy changes. It demands a deliberate shift in both culture and practice: embedding agency, autonomy, and authority into the fabric of learning design roles, and recognising learning designers as strategic partners rather than support staff. This means rethinking not only structures, but also mindsets, leadership behaviours, and the daily rituals that shape how value and expertise are recognised across the institution. By committing to this cultural and practice transformation, universities can move beyond managing symptoms to creating environments where learning designers are empowered, engaged, and able to realise their full creative and professional potential.

Concluding Remarks

As learning design matures as a profession, and as technological and pedagogical complexity accelerates, we must ask how to ensure our work remains creative, strategic, and human-centred, even as our roles evolve. Crucially, we reject the notion that dreaming is the opposite of reality. Our visions are grounded in lived experience and possess practical force. They shape how we approach our work, lead our teams, and advocate for institutional change. This is not wishful thinking, but hopeful, transformative dreaming and an act of self-actualisation and a catalyst for radical reimagining the systems and practices that define our field. By embedding agency, autonomy, and authority into the fabric of learning design roles and by recognising learning designers as strategic partners, universities can create environments where innovation, well-being, and professional legitimacy are not aspirations, but realities. In doing so, we can move beyond managing disruption, towards building a future where learning designers are empowered to drive meaningful, lasting change that benefits the entire educational community. Our collaborative reflections have shown that agency, autonomy, and authority are not fixed attributes, but living, evolving experiences that are shaped by the individual and their settings. For learning designers, these concepts are not abstract ideals; they are the foundation of meaningful, impactful, and transformative practice. Through our vignettes and cross-case synthesis, we have illuminated a shared yearning to be recognised. We dream of roles where we are valued from the outset, where creative inquiry is encouraged, and where our voices help shape both everyday practices and strategic directions. Yet, our analysis also reveals the psychosocial dimensions of our work, particularly when these aspirations are constrained by imperfect realities. These impacts signal the need for more than resilience or piecemeal policy changes; they demand a deliberate shift in both culture and practice.

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